

Cheating Death

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Summary: While on a flight, Astrid is killed. A year goes by and Hiccup doesn't seem to have gotten over her untimely death. A mysterious woman arrives, a dear old friend of Gothi's, with an equally strange proposition for Hiccup, one that suggests the dead might be able to return. But, what results froms breaking the unspoken laws of nature?

1. Chapter 1

First story on this site, I'm a little exctied!

Obviously, I own nothing, the characters and world all belong to that wonderful place known as Dreamworks.

This is a story about Hiccup and Astrid, a few years after the Red Death panic. While out on thier dragons, Astrid is killed, leaving Hiccup devastated. A year later a mysterious woman arrives with a strange claim that Astrid could be brought back to life.

Chapter 1 Accidents Happen

Fishlegs was finishing an shift of patrol out on the ocean, and it was about time. His stomach was furious with that tiny breakfast he'd had.

"Alright, Meatlug, time to head back. There might be a nice pile of you favorite rocks waiting for you." Fishlegs said, mumbling to his dragon in his faux-mother voice he used only to her.

He shifted his weight on Meatlug's saddle and she turned with him. It had taken a while to get used to talking to her like that but he'd perfected it, so that he could communicate with his dragon without words or hand motions. He padded her lovingly on the head, telling her both that she was doing well and that Fishlegs loved her.

He was in the process of turning back toward Berk when something loomed from behind a sea stack, something gray-brown that did not belong there. Hovering in the air he turned them back toward it.

"A ship?" Fishlegs said aloud. He was afraid that terrible things would happen on his watch. Why did it have to be him?!

He roused the napping Terrible Terror behind him and it gave a high-pitched whine. The little dragon stretched and looking at him lazily, large yellow eyes ready to deliver the rushed note Fishlegs was currently tying to his back leg.

"To Berk! Find Hiccup!" Fishlegs threw him up and with a little tired dip he fluttered as he got a grip under his wings. He sped off and vanished in the blue.

Fishlegs stayed and hovered within spying distance of the ship. Someone had to keep an eye on it. When the other got there they would devise a plan, Hiccup would know what to do. But what if they attacked? They would get away, leaving him and Meatlug at the bottom of the ocean!

Fishlegs was shaking with his fear-made anxiety when four flapping dots grew in the distance where the Terrible Terror had vanished. He drew a very relieved sigh.

"Fishlegs, what's happening?" Hiccup asked immediately, taking his leadership without caution.

"There's a ship, it's not one of ours." Fishlegs said, pointing a finger down at the straying ship.

"That looks like a Berserker ship." Astrid said, squinting at the ship's ripped sail.

"It is." Hiccup said, looking through his trusty eye-glass. The sail was ripped and the entire ship looked as though it had had chunks bitten out of it, and then set on fire. Char marks turned most of the hull a dirty black. "But it doesn't look like there any one on it. Let's get a closer look."

The five dragons and their riders followed his lead. A cautious downward glide to the ship, and they circled in, Toothless landed on the empty deck. It looked like it had gone through a dragon battle, with the fiery scorch marks and smeared pools of what looked terribly like blood.

"What happened?" Hiccup said to himself.

At his voice something rattled behind a crashed stack of barrels. A rattle, and a scraping against wood.

"Hello?" Hiccup called. He hopped off his dragon, an act that Toothless met with a disproving grunt and head-shake. Hiccup patted his dragon hoping to reassure him as he stepped toward the barrel pile. Careful steps, _pat click pat click_, and Hiccup was standing a bare foot in front of the barrel. Something, or someone, was behind it. He could hear them breathing.

Hiccup made to move the barrel when that someone burst from

underneath them. A man, wild haired and wide eyed, wielding a bloody sword and an empty crossbow, came screaming out at him. Toothless was soon between Hiccup and the strange man, screaming at the man as Hiccup tried to assess the situation.

"Wait! Wait!" Hiccup said, trying to intervene between the man with the blade and his dragon. "Toothless, no!"

The dragon listened but the man didn't. He lashed forward with the sword, missing from bad aim and a weak arm. He threw his arm forward like a child throwing its first ball. The sword crashed down on the boat with a thud. Hiccup pulled Toothless back and climbed on his back quickly. In the air they rose as the madman shouted and shook his bloodied blade around.

"What's wrong with him?" Tuffnut said, leaning forward over his dragon's head to see the wild man in action.

"Can we keep him?" Ruffnut, his sister, chimed in.

"He can have you bed. He'd make a better roomie." Tuffnut grinned.

Ruffnut kicked him, sending him crashing off the dragon and only missing the steel-colored water by the quick snap of his dragon's teeth.

"Guys, look out!" Hiccup said, watching the man dig bolt from the mass of junk amid the barrels. He shot into the air recklessly, missing them all by far.

"Look out for what?" Tuffnut said.

"We're better off staying still." Snotlout leered.

"What happened?" Astrid asked, hovering closer to Hiccup and Toothless. "Do you think they were attacked?"

"Looks that way. By a dragon, maybe." Hiccup said. "Who knows how long this guy's been drifting about."

"By the smell? More than a month." Astrid said.

A war-cry, and the man was shaking his head madly and mumbling incoherent gasping words. Bolt after bolt, none of which found a mark other than the ocean below, the man shouted upward at nothing. Finally, words came to him in a desperate lashing out, "You'll never take me alive!"

One last bolt, fastened into the crossbow, and fired in a mad rage, this time striking much closer. In all his wailing, and previous misses, the expectations of the last was low. It came at Hiccup and Astrid much too fast. It was too quick and they were too unprepared.

Hiccup and Toothless jerked quickly to the right, out of harm's direct path. He heard the bolt sink into something thicker than water, and much closer to him. It was joined by a wounded shout, as much anger as sudden pain.

"Astrid!" Hiccup shouted as he dashed to look her way. He clutched at her middle, the bolt's end sticking out horribly from between her fingers, red seeping into her clothes and soaking her hand.

"Son of a—agh!" Astrid screamed as she pulled the bolt from her own flesh, a nasty ripping sound accompanying it, that made Hiccup cringe at the scene.

The madman was shouting vigorously, and the others were looking at Hiccup for what to do. He had to make a decision and quick, there wasn't much time. They had to get Astrid back to Berk.

"Take it down, there's nothing we can do for him now." Hiccup said to the others, feeling the weight of his words as he spoke then. There wasn't time for any other. "Astrid, we're going back."

She didn't argue and followed at a good pace behind Toothless. The ship and the other riders faded into the blue, and then suddenly a fiery explosion raged on top of the water. Hiccup felt his chest thundering. It was made worse by Astrid's troubled breathing. He held up for a moment so he was flying beside her instead of in front.

"Astrid?" Hiccup called. She didn't look good at all. She was soaked in red, it ran down Stormfly's side in rivets. Astrid was pale, the color completely gone from her face. Her eyes were dropping, half closed and waning, slumping in her saddle and gingerly holding her bloodied hand over her wound. "Astrid, ride with me."

She didn't decline. Stormfly seemed to understand, and didn't flinch when Toothless flew especially close to her. Astrid slid off the saddle and into Hiccup's helping arms. In her movement a new surge of sticky warm blood leaked from her hand-covered wound. He clasped one arm around her, securing her in front of him. He motioned to Stormfly with the other and flew as fast as he could toward Berk.

He had to hurry. There wasn't much time left.

Astrid's breathing had gone shallow and minuscule as Berk settled into view. Hiccup pushed Toothless to fly faster, but he knew the dragon was already pushing his limits. Berk was surging into view at an alarming rate but it still felt so far away.

"Hiccup," Astrid managed to squeeze out, her hand twitching toward him.

"We're almost home, Astrid. Don't worry." Hiccup said, more to reassure himself than her. "Just a little longer."

She exhaled, and her lack of argument was startling. She always had a comeback for his worrying over her, always. Maybe she knew his worry was well placed this time. It only refilled his grief.

Hiccup aimed for the village's center. Help would be there. Before he landed began shouting for help. He heard the desperation in his own voice but didn't care. When he landed a crowd was gathering to see what was happening. A few showed the troubled faces of uncertainty.

"Hiccup." It was barely a whisper, empty and breathy.

"Astrid, don't go, Astrid please." Hiccup said, watching her fight to keep her eyes open. She was looking at him, her blue eyes vanishing behind her heavy eyelids.

By the time some of the women had gathered around Hiccup and slid Astrid from Toothless's back, Hiccup felt in a daze. His hands were shaking and sweaty, the world seemed a step away from him, fenced by a black haze that drowned out the sound of the talking Vikings around him.

The women were shaking their heads.

"Astrid?" Hiccup asked, hoping to her breathy voice.

"Its too late." one of the Viking women said.

"She's gone."

And...scene. End of the first chapter - unrefined, sure, but whatever. There's the rest of the story, about half written, but before I just combard the net with more chapters, tell me what you think. If you hate it I'll leave it as is and not worry about the rest of it.

2. Chapter 2: Visiting Vikings

Chapter 2 Neighbors

Berk looked amazing in the first bright golden strands of day. Hiccup had taken to riding at dawn, and watching the world warming up was like watching a flower blooming, a beautiful flower. They had started the habit several months ago and neither were eager to break it. The sun was above the horizon when Hiccup was on the return lap to the village. It was already buzzing with ant-sized activity.

And at the docks wasâ€¦Hiccup let out an exasperated sigh. Among their own ships were two that weren't. The symbol on the sails were of a single sword with a thin string-like dragon zigzagging around the blade. It was one of their neighboring tribes here for an extended visit.

Hiccup felt like staying in the sky forever, or at least until those ships were gone. But he knew he couldn't. His father would be waiting at the docks, or at the house, looking upward in his permanent scowl, waiting for Hiccup to land. Then he would give a short speech on spending too much time in the sky and then they would be off to the docks, if they weren't already there, to greet their visitors.

He could see the large ant-spec outside his house that was his father. Stoick was standing offensively in front of the door. To avoid the confrontation for as long as possible, Hiccup took his time landing. But he saw the change in his father's stance, meaning he had seen his son and thus expected his immediate return to earth.

It had been a little more than a year since Astrid was killed. Hiccup had gone through a funk in the months that followed, he admitted, and hated the pity with which everyone looked at him. He started spending more and more time on Toothless, away from the village.

"Hiccup!" Stoick shouted as Hiccup and Toothless came in close enough. "Come on down, we've got company!"

Of course they did, Hiccup sighed. His father had taken it upon himself to arrange "visits" from their neighboring tribes, who just happen to bring with them single girls around Hiccup's age. The entire village would do everything in their power to push Hiccup and this girl together. It began as just awkward but now it was just an annoyance.

Hiccup steered the dragon as slowly to the ground as he could without provoking his father's innate wrath. One finally on the ground, Hiccup jumped from the saddle to follow his massive father down to the docks.

"They arrived just this morning." Stoick said, failing to hide his glee.

"So who is it this time?" Hiccup asked, not trying to disguise his dislike of the situation. This meant he'd be unwillingly spending a lot of time with some girl. He and Toothless were basically grounded.

"Oh, you'll see." Stoick almost laughed. He wore his prominent emotions on his sleeve, whether he would ever admit it or not. When he was happy his entire face glowed. When he was angry it burned through his skin, as red as his beard.

Hiccup groaned under his breath as they started down the rickety wooden walkway. It couldn't be worse than that blonde who couldn't stop talking, her voice like someone poking a Terrible Terror with the point of a sword. Or the brown haired girl with the weird flower fetish, every day Hiccup was met with a new flower-woven crown, and was forced to wear it in her presence. Or the freakishly tall her who had the irrational fear of doorways.

"Scaggs and I were good friends in our youth, and our fathers were friends, as were their fathers before them." Stoick spoke as they neared the docks. "It was happenstance that Scaggs had a daughter instead of a son. And I hear she is quite lovely."

Yeah, Hiccup thought, here it comes.

"How great it would be if our tribes were linked by more than just good friendship." Stoick said, nudging Hiccup with his massive elbow, nearly sending him off the walk and into the water below.

Hiccup sighed as he kept the two and a half step between his dad and himself. The word "marriage" had never been mentioned but it was always implied. He admired his father for trying but it was all too much. These visits always went the same way. It started with an awkward meeting at the docks, followed by an awkward tour of the village, which if Hiccup was sneaky he could lose her by early afternoon and avoid them all until the communal meal that night at the great hall.

Men from both tribes were helping unload the ship, greeting the visitors with handshakes and gusty hellos. Hiccup stood a few steps behind Stoick as the chief stepped from it. He, like Stoick, was

large and hairy. He met Stoick with a great booming laugh, grasping their large hands into a earth quaking shake.

A brown-haired girl followed him out. She was kind faced but a little spacey, a dreamy look on her face. Her voice mirrored that, her short greeting was wispy as smoke.

"Stoick, old friend," Scaggs said, moving a large hand toward the daughter. "This is my pride and joy, Esol. Quite a beauty, just like her mother."

"Aye, that she is." Stoick said. "Hiccup, my boy, why don't you show her to the village."

Unable to decline, Hiccup motioned toward the upward wooden walk to the village, she nodded, and skipped past the chiefs to walk with him. The first few steps were always in silence, with the occasional generic of seafaring, weather, or other nonchalant nonsense.

"I'm sorry to impose like this." Esol finally said, twisting her hands in front of her. "My father has been trying to marry me off for a year now."

"I understand that." Hiccup sighed. He told her as briefly as he could about his father's attempts to find him a wife.

They shared about their similar situations.

"He's so worried that I'll never marry and grow up to be an old hag like his sister. He's terribly ashamed of her, because she was unable to find a husband, and that somehow makes her unworthy to be part of his honorable family." Esol said, trying to make light of the family problem that by the twitching in her hands as she spoke, weren't that light. "Soâ€¦what's your father's deal?"

"He's justâ€¦a little overbearing sometimes." Hiccup said. He knew it was a lie and he figured she assumed as much. He wasn't the best liar and he knew how obvious it was when someone was avoiding a question. But she didn't push the issue.

They walked the rest of the way back to the village square, with Hiccup adding simplistic commentary. And like always, everyone in the village was eager to meet the visitors. A crowd gathered around Hiccup and Esol, asking questions and introducing themselves. It was no secret what Stoick was doing and Hiccup couldn't stand the way he was looked at when he was with his "possible future wife", like a mixture of gossip interest and pity.

With the crowd he was able to slip away and head up to his house. Toothless was waiting patiently beside it, pepping up at the sight of Hiccup.

"Hey, Bud." Hiccup patted his dragon.

Hiccup went inside and ran up the stairs. When they had visitors the more important among them stayed at Stoick's house, which meant Hiccup's room would be transformed into a multiple guest room. When he reached the top of the stairs he found it had already been rearranged. Several beds lined the walls, many of his things were pushed aside and out of the way.

Hiccup gathered his personal things, his journal and designs. When his house was taken over by strangers he often relocated to his closet at the smithy, or the cove if the weather was nice. He didn't like being shoved in a house with someone he was being pushed toward. He needed his own time, to himself, to think and defuse.

With all he needed in his satchel, Hiccup headed out to the smithy.

He knew the real reason his father was doing all this. It was because of Astrid. They had grown closer, and closer, and everyone assumed that they would end up together. They might have been right, too, had she not taken death so young. After she'd died Berk had been different, darker somehow, like the sun wasn't shining as bright. He'd started flying more, to get away from it all, sometimes from dawn to far past sundown. He didn't want to face the world she used to inhabit, the places she once stood; he could almost hear her like she used to speak.

Hiccup stored his satchel in the smithy and took to the sky right after. He didn't want to risk being seen and being pushed together with—what was her name?—Esol. The wind pushed all the worries away, even though temporary. It was so relaxing way up high.

Out in the distance he could see another ship, although it was much more familiar and welcoming, Trader Johan. There were already Vikings waiting on the dock to see what new treasures he could bring. Hiccup wouldn't mind sifting through the stock but he didn't want to deal with others, the latter feeling was stronger.

The day went by, and Hiccup only came down when the cooking food smell were too strong to resist. His stomach yearned, gurgled furiously. It seemed the entire village had come out to eat and drink with the visitors. There was a enormity of mirth and cheerful stories.

And of course, as Hiccup knew was inevitable, he and Esol sat together. It was always done on purpose. They were about halfway through the meal when Scaggs thundered over to them, a look of a mission on his wide face.

"Esol, I seem to have forgotten my favorite mug in my things. Could you go back and fetch it?" Scaggs said, rubbing his hands together.

"Sure." Esol said dutifully.

"Oh, Hiccup, do go with her. It's—dark out there." Scaggs said, with an agreement from Vikings around him.

He didn't argue, and stood with Esol and left the brouhaha at the great hall. The fresh air was lifting from the stifling social pressure.

"Your dad doesn't have a favorite mug, does he?" Hiccup asked. It was a ploy Stoick had tried many times, give Hiccup a quest for something nonexistent or unimportant, and invite the girl to go with him.

"No, he does not." Esol sighed, a little irritated.

"I'm sorry about all this." Hiccup shrugged.

"No, it's not just your dad. I mean, it's the same thing every time. We've been sailing around, going to tribe after tribe, trying to find me a _suitable _man. I've spent more time on the blasted boat than my own home. The problem is that no one is good enough for my dad. If Thor himself came down it wouldn't be good enough."

Hiccup listened to her rant as they walked to the house. Once inside, she plopped down in a chair by the hearth and Hiccup wasn't going to argue about not going back. He sat down across from her.

"Sounds as tiring as mine." Hiccup said. "At least they come to me, constantly moving around sounds horrible. Butâ€|you say that like someone wasn't suitable."

Esol laughed, but it was an empty laugh. "Yeah, something like that."

Hiccup offered her something to drink, since it seemed mutual that they weren't going back to the great hall. Sitting the cups down on the table she looked as though she wanted to say something, but was tentative about it leaving her tongue wrong.

"Iâ€|uh, overheard some of the villagers talking. About us." She finally said. She pushed the cup around on the table. "Who was she?"

"What?" Hiccup asked.

"She, the girl your dad is trying to replace." Esol said carefully, her voice indicating those were words she'd overheard.

Hiccup inhaled slowly, and exhaled just the same. She was watching him carefully, touching on something sensitive and aware of it. He paced, trying to find a way to answer that. He stirred the fire, and moved the gray flaky ashes around with the iron poker.

"Astrid." Hiccup sighed. It was the first time he'd said her name since that time. "We were close, one of my best friends. Sheâ€|died, killed."

"I'm sorry." Esol said softly. "I don't feel right about prying, especially since I hardly know you, but you've been drowning in grief this whole time."

"I know he's trying to be a good father." Hiccup said, letting out some of his own emotion turmoil. He could talk to her and in a few days she'd be one. It wouldn't matter what she knew. "He wants me to be happy, and I appreciate that, I do, but sometimes I just want him toâ€|back off."

"He loves you. Like a good father should."

"He is a good father, butâ€|I don't know." Hiccup sighed.

"You need to let your old wounds heal before you tramp over them." Esol said with a shrug. "I bet you compare every girl to that first one, and they don't even come close. They couldn't."

Esol was right about that, Hiccup nodded toward her. Every girl he'd met was either not enough like Astrid or too much like her. Their hair was too blonde or too dark, their voice reminded him of hers or it didn't, her eyes were blue or they weren't.

And Hiccup told Esol as much, talking for what felt like an hour. All the while she sat and listened, not interrupted or even shaking her head. It was nice to just talk about it, getting it off his chest. When at last he felt it was all out he sat down at the table.

"Feel better?" Esol asked.

"Yes." Hiccup nodded.

"You should. My mother always said that venting is good for the soul." Esol said. She smiled kindly at Hiccup, in a sisterly sort of way, maybe an aunt or grandmother if Hiccup had known his. "So, how long do you want to let them pretend-plan our wedding?"

Hiccup half-laughed and shrugged. "Whatever makes them happy. Have you met anyone actually decent on your travels?"

She almost laughed. "I suppose. We've been sending letters through trader Johan. He came today, and he nodded, which means that he'd got a letter for me, but I can't let my dad know about it. I'm hoping to see him in the morning and get it."

"Who's sending them?" Hiccup asked.

"I met him on the first trip we took. We justâ€¦connected, you know? Like when you see each other and there's thisâ€¦spark inside your chest, like you can't breathe, but it's okay. And everything is like it should be." Esol said, more dreamily than usual.

"They why are you still traveling around?" Hiccup asked, seeing the brightness that came in her eyes when thinking of her mystery letter-writer.

"Because he is below my father's outrageous standards." Esol sighed. "And he is trying to find someone that isâ€¦but, no one else compares. It's stupid and clichÃ©, I know, that our tribes haven't been on the best of terms, and any correspondence between us would be frowned upon."

"Then a marriage between tribes would come at the best time." Hiccup said, with a mimicking tone that made her laugh.

"Yes, I suppose it would." Esol sighed. "I would just have to explain to my dad that I'm in love with fisherman. He said that fisher_men are for fisher_women. He'd marry be to a goat before he'd see my on the arm of a fisherman."

"It's been a while, maybe he would understand." Hiccup suggested.

"Maybe, although on that first visit he left in a huff when he saw us together." Esol sighed, trying to hide her disappointment with a laugh. "You know, we've beenâ€¦planning to run away together. Not really planning, more of just wishful thinking. We could leave all

this silly caste nonsense behind and start our own tribe, just the two of us."

"Do it." Hiccup said.

"Just like that?" Esol asked. "Leave, sail into the sunset?"

"Sure." Hiccup shrugged. "Take the chance while you still can. You never know when you're going to turn around and he won't be there anymore."

Esol nodded. "It's better to live with those you love for a day than live forever without them."

Hiccup stood up, offering what little food they had in the house since their dinner had been cut short. They shared a simple meal of stale bread and dried fish, until the commotion coming from the village meant the great hall was emptying. The booming voices of Stoick and Scaggs came like thunder, traveling rapidly across the night air. They came back to the house, laughing like old friends do.

"That's my cue." Hiccup whispered to Esol as the great men came to a hush inside. They smiled in unison at the private dinner their children had obviously had. Esol nodded as Hiccup vanished back outside. Toothless eagerly greeted him, happy to see him again. He must have been at the dragon stables with the other dragons, judging by the strong stench of fish.

"You want to take one last lap around the island?" Hiccup asked Toothless, knowing what the answer would be. He was glad for the dragon's silence and undoubting devotion. Toothless never failed to cheer him up, remind him of what's important.

He climbed into the saddle, and with a mighty flap of his leathery wings they were off into the breezy night, the stars blinking behind the few wispy clouds. As they rounded the other side of the island, speeding through the chilly night, Hiccup let out a shout of frustration as they went racing toward the steel-blue waters, pulling up just in time to punch the water below with a fist of air, pushing it out into waves on either side as they soared just above its broken surface.

He couldn't stay out all night, he knew that. He'd have to call it a night and sleep. They landed at last in front of the empty smithy. Toothless seemed to understand that they weren't sleeping at home tonight, and as Hiccup unlatched the saddle Toothless looked toward the stables.

"Go ahead, bud." Hiccup said. "I'll be here."

Toothless gave one last look at Hiccup and nuzzled him a goodnight, then headed off toward the stables. It was much more comfortably for a dragon than the smithy's floor. Hiccup went to his narrow closet of a workshop where'd set up a makeshift cot. It wasn't home but it was better than a house full of strangers.

Hiccup woke up to the smell of soot, hot steel, and leather. It wasn't what Hiccup would call pleasant, but it was familiar, soothing and relaxing, like home away from home. He stretched, pushing himself

off the cot and into the streaming sunlight leaking through the uneven shutters.

Toothless was outside with the shrunken Viking elder, Gothi. She was holding her staff that was at least a head and half taller than her in one boney hand, and gently patting Toothless on the head with the other. When she spotted Hiccup she turned her old face, uneven and wrinkled, and nodded a greeting.

"Do you need something?" Hiccup asked. He couldn't understand Gothi's silence, but at least she wasn't drawing pictures in the dirt. It was like trying to understand post-lightening Snotlout.

She nodded, a definite yes. She pointed upward toward her dangerously perched house, high above the village. She motioned to Hiccup, then to herself, and then to Toothless.

"You want me to take you to your house?" Hiccup asked.

She nodded, and motioned to them all again. He stepped over to Toothless and held out his hand to help Gothi onto his back. It seemed to be what she'd wanted, because she did not complain. She held onto him with her liver-spotted hands as they flew upward, as gently as he could, to not rattle her old fragile bones. They landed just as soft on the wooden landing that extended from her house.

The wind was louder up here, and it moved the wooden planks. It was kind of like flying with two feet on the ground. He helped Gothi off Toothless and threw his foot back into the stirrup, ready to fly back to the ground, or take a lap, he hadn't decided yet. But Gothi struck his good leg with her staff, much harder than he thought possible. She was shaking her gray head and pointing to her house.

"What?" Hiccup said, rubbing his leg.

She tapped her staff on the ground, pointing at him and then to her house.

"You need me to lift something?" Hiccup shrugged, indicating he didn't understand.

The door to the hut-house opened, and a shadowy stranger was in the doorway. "She wants you to come inside, boy."

It was a dark skinned woman, her eyes blacker than the darkest shadows, her wild raven hair was streaked with charcoal and white. She was tall and lean and clothed in exotic colors. She gave Hiccup an eerie feeling as she looked at him, as though she could see right through him, his thoughts, fears, everything.

"Who are you?" Hiccup asked cautiously.

"Come in, boy, and I might tell you." the strange woman said, her foreign-lined voice as dark and wild as her hair. She vanished from the doorway and Gothi pushed Hiccup toward it with her staff, nudging him in the lower back and into the darkness that was her hut-house.

The strange woman was sitting down cross-legged around a small twitching yellow fire. It seemed unusually out of color, like natural

sunlight, as unusual as the woman by it. Gothi shut the door using her staff, and sat across from the other woman as easily as a child would. She motioned to Hiccup to do the same.

He sat, unsure of why of what they wanted.

"Hiccup," the strange woman said. Her eyes were closed.

"Yes?" Hiccup answered, tentatively.

"Gothi and I have been good friends for a good long time. She, unlike myself, has a great deal of compassion for others. In our communications she had told me about you. I am in possession of a certain array of talents, procured over a lifetime of learning and searching. She has asked me to help you, if you are willing to ask for it." the woman said, her voice a strain under the average human, that mixed with the strange-light fire it all had a creepiness that Hiccup didn't like.

"Help with how?" Hiccup asked, his curiosity getting through.

The woman opened her black eyes and turned her head toward him in one swift motion. Hiccup wished she would look away.

"You have lost someone dear to you." the woman said.

Hiccup opened his mouth to say something but closed it again.

"I have knowledge and experience in particular skills that can help you." She said. "But first and foremost you must agree to never speak of what shall be spoken here, not to anyone outside this hut, not your dragon, not your friends, not to a book, not your father."

"Why?" hiccup shrugged. "What could we say that would be so bad that my dad can't hear it?"

"If you want to know, promise me first." She said, starting at him with those mystic eyes. "Your father is among those who distrust anything they cannot fight with a tangible blade. The taboo and dangerous aren't to be spread as butter at breakfast."

Taboo? Dangerous? What in Oden's name was she talking about? How was any of this nonsense going to help him? Especially about losing someone—what was there to help with that? Forget Astrid faster? So that way he wasn't comparing the others to her and finding their shortcomings?

"Alright." Hiccup said. "I won't say anything. I promise."

The dark woman closed her eyes and breathed in the fire's fumes, lifting her head back, stretching her dark neck, and lowering her chin while exhaling them out again. "There is an old ritual, its origins unknown and well hidden, to bring blood and breath back into the bones of the dead."

"What?" Hiccup said, unsure of whether he'd heard what he thought he'd heard. "Bring the dead back to life?"

"Bringing them back into this world." she said. "Life does not cease,

but continues elsewhere. Tell me, Hiccup, how badly do you want to see her?"

Hiccup couldn't believe what he was hearing. He must still be asleep in the smithy. The cot must be straining his body and causing this ridiculous dream. Astrid was dead, and dead meant dead, as in not alive, not living, a body without a life, cold bones. She had died in his arms. He had seen the life leave her eyes.

There was a thick lump in his throat.

Still, there was a malicious tint to this woman that made Hiccup believe she wasn't just telling ghost stories. There was an essence around her that spoke of otherworldly being, one foot in the unknown and the other in the snow. Could it be possible to actually bring someone back from the dead?

"Tell me how." Hiccup said, feeling both excited and foolish at the mere idea, and a near-dry well of hope of the mere possibility.

3. Chapter 3: Choices

Thanks for the support! I started out aiming to update once a week - the first two came out a lot faster and I happened to have more time last week.

Chapter 3 Choices

Toothless was outside Gothi's house walking on the uneven wooden porch. His uncertainty left him in a constant motion, the floor itself gently roused in the upward breeze. He was used to the solid ground of the island, the kind that didn't move. That or in the air - to a dragon it was either/or, never both at the same time.

Hiccup heard Toothless's impatient snort but he didn't want to leave just yet. Gothi's tiny space was suffocating, the dark walls made it feel like a cave, but the wind gently pushed against the outside and the entire house seemed to wave back and forth.

He'd been inside Gothi's stuffy house for maybe half an hour. He was still on edge after hearing the strange woman's impossible proposal of brining the dead back to life, more specifically, Astrid. The abnormal countenance of this strange woman was the only thing keeping him from leaving. Everything from her face to her yellow-fire was beyond anything Hiccup had ever seen.

The house was dark as night, lit only in the dancing flickers of the yellow-fire. It had taken him a few minutes to realized that this fire wasn't burning through the stout log it sat on. It was not heating his face in a blaring heat like a normal fire, but a pleasant warmth, like a sunny day. Every few moments the strange woman would pause, suck in the fire's fumes like incense, expanding her chest with lengthy inhalation, and then she would hold it for a extended second before exhaling it back into the fire.

Like the woman, this fire was strange and unusual, and had on foot in the unknown and unnatural.

"Tell me how." Hiccup repeated. Even if it was as ridiculous as it

gets, what harm would there be in hearing it?

"Blurring the line between us and the other often results in disaster. The dead are a tricky lot, and opening the door causes distress to the slumbering souls and stirs the unresting into a frenzy. Many will want to come through the door. I have never seen or heard of a return of life that did not result in more death, and troubling consequences." the strange woman said behind closed eyes, the fire warming her dark face, the wrinkles around her eyes like black claws reaching out.

"Soâ€¦it's not possible?" Hiccup asked. "Then why even tell me?"

"If I thought it not possible I would not have come this far from my home." she said with patience that surprised him.

Gothi, who had been still, nodded. Hiccup scratching his head. It didn't make sense. If the risks outweigh the outcome then it wasn't worth it. He opened this mouth to voice this when Gothi put up a white boney hand. She reached to her neck with the other and pulled on a worn braided leather rope, on which was a glassy pendant. It was unlike anything Hiccup had ever seen - the insides seemed to swirl, a blue-white gleamy steam, and like the strange woman's black eyes, it was not effected by the yellow-fire.

"Gothi and I have both lead lives that sometimes were stranger than the strangest tale you've ever heard." the strange woman said, a ghost of a smile glancing across her shadows face. "She has a compassion that many people do not share. She has compassion for you, she tells me, and offers a most generous gift to you."

She motioned to the pendant Gothi had removed from her neck with an elderly woman's steady hands. She placed it carefully in the other woman's open palm.

"And that isâ€¦?" Hiccup asked, watching the swirling pendant, oblivious to the darkness and yellow lit around it.

"It is a miracle." she said as if it explained it all.

"A what?" Hiccup asked.

>"In our younger years, than you even, one of our journeys led us through an adventure unlike any other which resulted in this most generous gift. It is a miracle, in its raw form, given by a special friend which we cannot, by sworn oath and promise, disclose. With this, it is possible that the ritual will succeed."<p>

It was like waking up in the sunlight, hearing the cheers at a festival, a warmth filling his chest likeâ€¦like hope. The fire fluttered even though the air was still and the shutters were drawn tight. The strange woman held the pendant gingerly, like a precious jewel capable of shattering at the slightest provocation. The other hand was drawn to her mouth and with a cautious thin finger pressed to her lips, her black eyes bore into his with an intensity that defied her age.

"I will tell you the ritual." she said. "First, the location is very important. You must go up into the mountain where you will be secluded and dark, the darkest chambers of a cave, where the light of day cannot reach. There you must built an altar, I will instruct you,

for this altar is the gateway that will thin the barrier. From the cold, sunless stone, you must carve a casket. This stone tub you must fill with pure mountain water. Into this water you must put the bones of the deceased, arrange them naturally, for the rebirth. To guide the correct soul to the bones you will need a relic of theirs, when they were living, something they will be pulled to, along with the blood of a loved one. Together they are beacons."

Through all this Hiccup was feeling the lump in his chest growing tighter and pushing up into this throat. There was a lot of physical work involved. He didn't know if he could carve anything out of the stone. And her bones? How could he get to the tombs and bring them back to the cave without anyone knowing? A relic—her axe might do, and blood—his, he supposed. But how much?

His desperation and fear must have shone on his face. The woman let her hand fall to her bent knees. She reached over, her arms dangerously close to the fire, and took hold of his wrist. Her touch was cold but solid, not one that could be shaken easily.

"This is where most rituals end and disaster begins. By adding the miracle to the brew you will ensure success, that the right soul be attached." she said, her grip not relenting, her long fingers enclosing on his veins, his hand beginning to throb with the cutoff. "But I must warn you, and heed these words, boy. Opening the door can have ghastly consequences despite any cautious you may take. The dead are feverishly possessive, terrible lofty, and most fantastic. You must be sure, completely willing, and equal parts brave and foolish."

Hiccup felt his bloodless hand under the woman's grip, the seriousness in her stare mirrored in her hand. He found his voice, a whisper of disbelief. "Is it really possible? Can we bring her back?"

The woman did not answer but she did not relent her powerful eyes. She was waiting for an answer.

A choice, he had to make a choice. Walk out now and never think about this again, or stay and take a chance on that which he didn't understand, on that which he was unsure if he even believed. A choice.

"Yes." Hiccup said. "I'll do it."

"You must be silence of this." The woman persisted.

"I promise, I won't say a word." Hiccup said, feeling the balloon deflating, and nodding in relief as the woman released his wrist, blood surging back into his fingers. He held it with the other, massaging feeling back into it.

"Then to begin, location." the woman nodded.

Gothi lead Hiccup to the door, ushering him out onto the veranda. The light nearly blinded him - his eyes burned as he meet an eagerly waiting Toothless. He felt both excited and fearful as he climbed up on his back. He was yearning to get off this rickety house and never come back.

"Come on, Bud, we've got work to do." Hiccup said, looking upward at the looming snow-caped mountain that leered up into the clouds. His eyes were adjusting to the brightness.

They took off, leaving Gothi's hut and her mysterious friend far below. They lapped the island, shaking off the tight feeling of being on the ground. They lapped the mountain, around and around, through thin clouds that left Hiccup's cheeks cold. Higher and higher they circled. Through a layer of fluff-wisp clouds Hiccup felt the chill of the mountain ice. They lapped the blue-white mountain until Hiccup saw a dark gap in the icy thicket.

He guided Toothless in for a better look. The cave went deep into the mountain, its depths growing darker and darker. Hovering in its jagged mouth, Toothless gave a shake of reluctance. Hiccup reassured him with a few comforting words of encouragement, words that he was unsure of. He was feeling fear and anxiety stretching through his limbs, questioning what he was getting himself into.

"Let's see how far in it goes." Hiccup whispered to his dragon.

They flew inside at a cautious pace. Soon Toothless had to take the lead as the sunlight faded fast. Hiccup held on, trusting Toothless to get them there. The cave was black and Hiccup couldn't see his hands on the saddle right in front of him, or the dragon he was riding. But Toothless had given him no evidence that would make Hiccup doubt him.

Toothless fluttered a few paces and came to a halt on what Hiccup assumed was a solid cavern floor. He sniffed around, and then shot a vibrant blue plasma blast. Under the sharp blue glow Hiccup could see an oval shaped cavern, teeth hanging from the ceiling and reaching up from the floor, like the inside of a monster's mouth.

"Yes, this place will suffice."

Hiccup jumped, as did Toothless, who spun on the voice to attack. The strange woman was standing at the oval cavern's beginning, a miniature yellow-fire resting in her cupped hands. It glowed on her front, arraying her face in ghostly yellow shadows, but not her dark eyes. They were as black as the cave, deep pools of unknown and unknowable. She moved with the grace of a shadow to the other side of cavern, where Toothless's plasma blast had faded. She set her yellow-fire on the tip of a stalagmite.

"You should begin here." the woman said, her arms open and her hands motioning to the back of the cavern where rocks had naturally loosened, and the stalagmites grew thick as a table.

Under her scrutiny and guidance, Hiccup with the help of Toothless smoothed the floor as best it could be, removing the teeth, and using the misplaced stones to build what looked to Hiccup like a table. It wasn't like an altar like he had pictured. It was simple, he had imagined a strange death-table made of bones or something death related, drenched in blood or tied together with human hair.

He stepped away when the woman stopped speaking tips and advice. He turned to look at her and jumped when she appeared beside him, silent as a ghost. She was examining the altar with a close eye but never touched it. Hiccup had known something was strange about this woman

when he first saw her, and this only furthered his suspicions.

Within a few minutes she stood straight. Her bare hands moved over the altar's semi-smooth surface while she spoke whispering words. Hiccup could barely hear her voice, saying things he couldn't have understood even if he could. Behind closed eyes the woman pressed her open hands onto the altar.

Hiccup felt a chill, and Toothless began to stir uneasily, backing away with wide eyes, tense and ready to evade an unseen threat. Hiccup raised his hands to calm the dragon. Toothless's reaction was cause for warning, Hiccup thought. He patted him on the nose, reassuring him, when the woman spoke again. To Hiccup this time.

"It is done." She turned from the altar. She took a step away from it and used her feet to examine the stone floor. With her long fingers she pointed down, "Here, carve the casket here."

"I don't have tools." Hiccup said. He was not going to attempt to blast through the floor. It would cause a cave-in before it brought someone back to life.

"I will remain here. Return when you are ready, but I advise you not to dally." She nodded, still as the stone.

Hiccup pulled himself onto Toothless and flew out of the cave, a little less weary than before. The sun was high and the clouds were lit bright, and again his eyes stung for a few moments. His stomach was gurgling and he hadn't realized how hungry he was until he was soaring back down to the village. He would get something to eat before he went to the smithy for some tools, and then it was back up to the mountain. With any luck he wouldn't be cornered by anyone.

He knew his father wouldn't approve of any of this. From the woman to the cave, none of it would be pleasing. It was like she had said, he hated anything he couldn't engage outright, tangible and solid.

Hiccup landed close by the smithy, smelling the fresh bread baking a few houses away. No one would notice in a single loaf went missing, right? They would assume a dragon snatched it. He told Toothless to stay, and slunk around the smithy to the house with the bread. His stomach was fighting painfully, urging him to keep going. He could almost taste it.

From the open window Hiccup could see the plump Viking woman kneading sticky dough, another fussing with the fire. Hiccup reached in slowly to the basket where bread was cooling, and snatched a loaf. He meandered back to the smithy. No one seemed to be waiting to pounce him with questions, and his father and his visiting friends seemed to be preoccupied. He made it back to the smithy, loaf in hand. Toothless was waiting patiently, sniffing the loaf eagerly.

"I bet there's fish up at the stables." Hiccup said to the dragon, who immediately took the invitation to leave. He trotted up toward the dragon stables where fish were kept on demand for the steady flow of hungry dragons.

Hiccup sat on the cot and ate his fill of the bread. The loaf was all

that was left, and not wanting to waste it, Hiccup finished it. He leaned back on the cot and rubbed the crumbs from his hands.

What was he doing? Listening to some crazy old woman's ghost stories? It was all so maddening. And he had the feeling that it was just going to get worse. Hiccup gathered the tools he thought he would need to carve a casket out of the hard stone, and waiting in his little room for Toothless to return.

But in a few minutes he knew he wouldn't be able to stand the waiting. He tucked the tools into a satchel and headed for the dragon stables. Moving was much better than waiting around doing nothing. The tools ticked and clicked as he walked, but luckily he didn't run into anyone that wasn't satisfied with a simple nod as greeting.

The stables were a jump away from the village and was like a great hall for the dragons. Many who were too big to fit into their rider's home slept in the hay with the others. Hiccup was greeted warmly by the dragons, with dry, scaly noses and dragon-grunt hellos.

Toothless was eating happily, giving Hiccup a short glance of notification. Hiccup walked through the hay-strewn floor where dragons had nested, all the different dragons making their nesting area to suite their own needs. Hiccup made his way across them, to a blue and yellow Deadly Nadder who watched him walked up with half closed yellow eyes.

"Hey, Stormfly." Hiccup said, reaching out and patting the depressed dragon. She gave a little head nod, but otherwise didn't move. "What to you say to a lap around the island?"

Since Astrid died he had made an effort to take Stormfly on flights. She never turns them down, although some of her energy seems to have left with her rider. While Toothless ate he took Stormfly up and around the island. It seemed to have pepped her up, thought not much. They landed just outside the stable, and Stormfly nudged Hiccup, as if she knew what he was intending to do.

Toothless was lying in the hay and jumped up when they landed, nuzzling Stormfly and Hiccup in order. He secured his satchel and climbed onto Toothless. They lurched upward into the air and vanished back onto the other side of the clouds. They didn't head straight to the cave, in case someone else was in the sky. When they were both satisfied that they weren't being followed they aimed for the cave.

The woman was sitting a few feet in front of the altar with her dark eyes closed. He slid off the dragon and she stayed as still as the cave around her, like she was part of it. She stood as Hiccup came closer.

"Alright, so I just start digging?" Hiccup asked, dumping his borrowed tools on to ground.

She nodded, and with her foot she tapped the ground he had been sitting on. Hiccup started to carve out a human-sized tub from the hard stone. The woman told him the length, the width, but did not disclose the depth. She advised him only to dig through. He could not use Toothless, but not because of the cave-in possibility, but

because Hiccup needed to toil about it by himself. By his own hands must the ritual be erected. Through his own sweat and blood must it be carried.

Hours passed and Hiccup continued to carve through the stone. His hands ached but he didn't stop. He couldn't. With every throb in his hands and arms, with every jab at the stone, with every piece of rock that he pushed out, he thought of the possible result.

It all sounded like a fantasy, a child's dream of their lost parent magically returning home after months of a absence. But where does fantasy end and reality begin? Could it be possible? A part of him was doubting it all, constantly, but the other part was a child holding magic dust.

But what if there was a chance? Even the slightest, furthest, tiniest flicker of a gasping chance - how could he pass it by? It was Astrid. If there was a chance he could see her again, talk to her, hear her, touch her—he had to take it.

"That will suffice." The woman said at last.

Hiccup was on his hands and knees inside the casket, cheek level with the cave floor. His hands were swollen and sore. His arms were shaking and after he'd dropped the tools he was sure he couldn't pick them up again. The woman was standing on the tub's edge, eyeing the hole.

Hiccup climbed out of the tub and collapsed on the cavern floor. Toothless, who had been napping, nosed him gently.

"It would be better if the water has never seen the sun. I will stay here. When you return in the morning the water will be prepared. With you, bring her bones." The woman said.

Hiccup did not argue with her or even attempt to speak. Everything hurt and yearned for a fifteen hour nap. Tomorrow his hands would be sore like nothing else, and it would be hard to hide them. What would he tell his father? What else would cause them to be as red and swollen?

He would worry about all that in the morning, when he had to. For now his main objective was to sleep. Even the cot in the smithy was a welcome though. Toothless was eager to get back outside, and Hiccup let him guide himself, since his hands were near uselessness.

It was well past sundown. The stars were bright and the moon was a sliver among them. The village was quiet with sleeping Vikings, with the occasional fire-light flickering in a window. Hiccup landed near the smithy and patted Toothless goodnight, sending the dragon off the sleep in the stables. Hiccup collapsed onto the cot, trying not to move his hands too much.

Tomorrow—he would have to gather her bones.

Hiccup tried to cast those thoughts aside for the night. He would worry about that in the morning, when he had to.

And that's Chapter 3! A note - I picture this "strange woman" kind of like a old-school Spanish gypsy, but really old, with crazy wild dark

hair and eyes, dark olive skin, wrinkly - like a woman who has spent a lifetime in the sun with no sunscreen, and with clothes that were once vibrant but had faded and worn through al lifetime of use.

4. Chapter 4: Them Bones

Alright, Chapter four, here we go! Thanks for all the reviews, I'm glad I'm not the only one who thought this story would be interesting.

Chapter 4 Them Bones

Bones. Hiccup's dreams were full of bones; dry white, dirt smothered, cracked seams, snapped femurs, withered tendons, empty eyed eye-shell skulls with worms slithering through broken teeth. That fitful night was overflowing with bones. Their sharp edges stabbing him, snapping like angry teeth, as he was trying to get away.

How many time he threw himself from the cot in his sleep he lost count. He knew after the third he should give up on sleep, but in a few minutes he grew too tired, and resigned back to the cot with hopes of a dreamless rest of the night.

Finally he was stirred by Toothless just before sunrise. His bright green eyes were staring wordless worries at him.

"It's alright, but." Hiccup said, patting the faithful dragon with a tired hand. It never failed to amazed Hiccup just how smart Toothless could be. Smarter than most Vikings, it seemed.

Hiccup sighed, stretching his arms upward, trying to push the tiredness out. If only everything was alright. This whole ordeal was more stress than he'd ever felt. His entire body was weak from the constant tension. He wrung his sore hands. They weren't as terrible as he'd intentionally feared. Yes they were sore, but no more than after a day's work at the forge or rebuilding a house, or when they'd built the dragon stables. He turned them over for a quick inspection. They were just another thing in the past few hours that were strange.

Hiccup took in the dull sunrise of the morning; the bright orange and pinks were covered by thick dawn-clouds. Stationary gray-blue masses hovered on the edge of the waters and blended together in the distance. The whole world had the same dawn-blue haze that hung with a dampness.

It would rain later, Hiccup thought. Those clouds were filled with rain and were waiting for the moment to divide and engulf the island and waters were pelting ice-drops of water.

This delayed dawn-light gave Hiccup the perfect opportunity. He returned to the smithy for a leather bag, and then hopped onto Toothless and flew over the village. He had something to do today that he rather not be seen doing. The bones. Her bones.

Right now, with the dull morning, no one would see the flash that was a Night Fury heading toward the tombs. He could have walked through the village but this was faster. With the brightness of day approaching his time was limited and his window was closing.

Thank Oden for Viking tradition. Because of them Astrid's bones were still on the island. Bodies of the dead were stored away in the old tombs on the other side of the island, deep in the mountain, until they were nothing but bones. They were sealed away behind a heavy rock-door where the bodies would slowly melt their flesh and pink insides without the worry of scavengers. When the bones were white and bare they were gathered on the funeral-boat's pyre. As the boat drifts out to the open waters the pyre fire would guide them to the other side.

Hiccup had been dreading the funeral-day. This one especially. Astrid's turn was coming soon and had this woman waited another month the bones might have been lost to the sea.

Toothless landed on the non-assuming tomb's doorstep. It had small stone statues of sturdy looking Vikings, standing menacingly to thwart tomb-robbers. Between them was a massive stone door that the strongest of Vikings joined together to shove it aside. The idea of Hiccup trying to move it alone was laughable. Luckily, he had Toothless.

Between the two of them, (although it was mostly Toothless), they pushed the stone door aside just enough for Hiccup to pass through. Inside it was dark, with a certain dead-bound eeriness that sent terrible shivers. Toothless clawed at the opening, whining at his rider, not wanting Hiccup to go alone.

"I'll be fine, Toothless." Hiccup said, although he was unsure if he believed it himself. There were a few torches in a stone basin beside the door and he picked one from the bunch and poked it outside. Toothless lit it in a bright blue flash that instantly erupted into a red-orange blaze. "Thanks, bud."

Turning back to the tombs, Hiccup was filled with dread. The fire cast flickering light on the walls, exposing that which had previously been hidden by darkness. The tombs were an interconnecting set of hallways with carved out slabs in the stone walls where bodies decomposed. There were many empty slabs, but many were filled with drying bones and bodies in various stages of de-fleshing.

The stench was nearly unbearable. It sent Hiccup into a coughing fit, choking on the sufferable rotten-flesh odor. It had left little room for air. Hiccup covered his mouth and nose with his sleeve, which helped little. His stomach was turning over what little food he'd given it. The emptiness was making the wooziness that much worse, emanating through his limbs and into his head. The hallways were growing longer, darker. He sat down, rather quickly, causing a series of snorts and grunts from Toothless.

He had refused to be among those that carried Astrid inside the tombs, on purpose. He knew he couldn't do it. He couldn't take the finalizing of it. Maybe, inside, he knew that it wasn't over.

When his head quit swirling he stood up. He tightened his grip on the torch and fought to continue. He didn't have to continue very far. Since they'd made a peace with the dragons the bodies didn't pile up as often and the deepest parts of the tombs hadn't been used. They didn't need to be.

He found her. Her bones were pale, her skull empty and silent. Strands of her blonde hair still clung to it, a pool of them twisted around her head. Suddenly the stench wasn't bothering him as much. The clothes were sore when she'd died hung on the bones, her ribs like red hills. It was almost too much. There was a jagged hold in the shirt, jutting through a broken rib, where she'd been struck. Her trusty axe was beside her, once laid in her fleshy hands. With nothing to hold it the axe had fallen to the side.

Hiccup felt the horrible lump in his throat jump. The air wasn't filling his lungs. His hands were shaking. On his back he'd slung the leather bag, hanging limp with its emptiness. He dropped it to the tomb floor where it punched a layer of dust into the air. Shaking, he knew he had to hurry. It was only a matter of time before someone spotted a nosy Night Fury beside the tomb.

Hiccup started with her skull. It was the most obvious, the closest. He picked it up, his trembling hands incapable of holding it still. Brushing the loose hair off, they fell twisting and twirling to the floor. Her crystal eyes were once there, bright and blue, starting back at him. But now they were empty sockets, windows to the back of her skull.

He placed the skull carefully as delicate glass into the bag. The individual bones of her neck were neck, so small and so precious. After that, each bone came easier. Her clothes were brittle and were easily pushed from the bones.

He held the two halves of the borne rib in his hands to see the damage for himself. They were broken in two, shattered, irreparable. How was there any fixing this? The bones seemed to have a red tinge as if the blood had stained them - or was it just him?

Bone by bone, his hands were shaking less as he placed the last bone of her foot into the bag. He secured it on his shoulder and reached for the axe. He knew if anyone happened to come in and see the tattered remains of her clothes without the bones a ruckus would ensue. The village would be telling ghost stories of demon bones, and if Astrid were seen walking through the village they'd both be in trouble. This had never happened before, Hiccup didn't want to think about what paranoid and terrified Vikings would do.

Anyway he thought about it he knew there would be hell to pay. But Hiccup could shake those thoughts now, because the future was still just that - the future.

Leather bag tucked in his arms, juggling the axe and torch, Hiccup quickly made his way back to the stone door where Toothless was playing lookout on the other side. When he heard his master coming back he jumped up eagerly. Hiccup doused the torched and left it inside. Cradling the leather bag he squeezed back out.

"Let's get back to the cave." Hiccup instructed as he jumped onto the saddle. He held the bag tight to his chest, and the axe in his hand, but not so tight that he threatened the bones with breaking.

The dullness of the morning had lingered into the morning. The sun was warmed the clouds but they had held strong against. There was an overcast dreariness that foreshadowed a storm, lightening, thunder, and rain. As they soared upward the clouds thickened, and Hiccup

thought he heard the distance crash of thunder. They flew through the dark cave until they arrived at the familiar oval ending. The strange woman was still sitting where she had been beside the casket, reflecting the yellow-fire in a simmer.

"You have brought the bones." She said with a gentle nod of her head. "Bring them here to the water."

Hiccup slid of Toothless who was glad to stay a wing's length away from the altar and casket. He walked the leather bag of bones to the casket's simmering side. Inside was ink-water, darker and thicker than he thought water should be. The woman must have filled it while he was gone. He wanted to know how, but at the same time he didn't want to ask.

"As they were in life, place them into the water." she advised.

And Hiccup did as she told. He opened the bag and searched for the skull. He knew where that went, and it would be a guide for the rest. He held it before the water, and inhaled and held his breath as he plunged it below the water's surface. Around his hand it felt like water, freezing water, that tingled along his bare skin.

The water seemed to guide the skull's placement on the bottom, pulling it along with water-hands. Bone by bone it was the same, even if Hiccup didn't have the slightest inkling where the bone was in his own body, the water knew where it went. Like the woman, and so much else lately, it had inexplicable strangeness about it.

The last bone went into the water and Hiccup felt the same erratic thump-thumping in his chest, and for a moment his memory was clear - he was holding her still flesh body, Berk was coming fast but not fast enough, a hand clenched to his shirt, its grip lifting, her eyes fading. For a fleeting moment, Astrid was dying in his arms.

Hiccup caught his breath. The bones were in the water. The task was done. Why didn't he feel any relief? He sat back, his sore hands in a renewed state of swollen pain. The water had soothed the pain but outside of it the pain returned. He must have been gripping the saddle tighter than usual. Come to think of it, the past few hours were a bit blurry.

"The relic." the woman said, answering his unspoken question. "Something of hers, something she knew well."

Hiccup reached for the axe, and felt its weight in his hands. It was like an extended arm. When her bones would be sent out to sea the axe would have been official handed down, but until then it was hers.

"Before you add it, consider the third ingredient." She said like a warning.

"What?" Hiccup asked, not thinking between her words.

"The third ingredient, boy. It is the blood of a loved on." She nodded toward the axe.

Blood, his blood. He looked between the water and the axe knowing the best way to go about it. Inhaling and holding it, he gripped the axe

tighter in one hand and raised the other along the axe's edge. He exhaled and slide his palm along the sharp metal. It stung as fresh, red blood oozed from his hand, along the metal blade, running in rivets downward on the gray, and dripping off into the water and spreading like poison.

His hands were shaking worse as he lowered the bloody axe into the water. It vanished below the surface and like the bones was guided by unseen forces to the bottom.

"Touch the altar." the strange woman advised. She was beside Hiccup, and her grip was on his bloodied hand's arm. She walked him to the altar, gesturing to place his wounded hand onto the stone altar.

Hiccup was past arguing. He pressed his stinging hand against the altar's cold surface. A strange sensation coursed through his body, like a shock through his body's blood supply. When it had ended he removed his hand from the altar and clasped it with his other. A bloody handprint was left behind.

"Take the miracle." she said with an outstretched hand. Her fingers were tangled in the leather strap, the little glistening vial resting safely in her palm.

Hiccup took it with his good hand. The glossy swirls were friendly, like a warmth in a bottle. It appeared to be a little crystal container with a simple cork in its top. Hiccup held the container in his bloodied hand and tried to pull the cork with the other. Vikings didn't have the means to make something soâ€¦perfect. There were no markings of creation, no dents or scraps. The surface was too smooth and seamless.

It was all so strange. The woman, and how everything she touched seemed to ebb with the same strangeness, otherworldliness. They way her eyes were so dark, like how the unknown is only unknown because it is hidden by shadows, darkness. And how she could know all these things, how to erect an altar and what words to whisper. Where did not acquire this kind of knowledge?

Hiccup fought with the vial, and eventually won. The cork popped out but the insides didn't budge. In his shaking hands he held the open container out over the water, and slowly turned it upside down. The swirling blue insides dripped out in a single liquid-crystal droplet. It floated more than dripped, into the dark water.

As it hit the surface the entire tub of water seemed to vibrate. A simmer ran through the water and it fizzled, but soon was gone. The water was not silent. The smooth surface quivered and quaked.

"You have done all you can." the woman said. She stood and walked to the water's side. Her dark eyes were looking into depths of the water. "Three days. Wait three days and then return. Three days on the hour."

The strange simmer seemed to radiate from the water and into Hiccup. Suddenly, he felt a surge of hope. It was warm and made him realize that he had been harboring doubt this entire time, and in lieu of true hope he'd thrown this faith in that which he didn't understand, or believe. It had been a blind false hope in the unknown.

"I will stay here. I have never seen a completed and successful ritual." said the woman as she sat beside the gently rolling water. "It would be a pleasure to watch the impossible unfold."

There it is - chapter four! I know that whole Viking tradition of putting people in tombs probably isn't right, but I wanted the scene with Hiccup going to the closet place of death to the living and having to pick up her bones. And originally I had Hiccup going back to the village after he'd brought the bones to the cave because that's where the axe was, but then re-reading it I didn't like it. So I changed it. Whoo!

Tune in next week for Chapter 5: Three Days!

5. Chapter 5: Three Days

Alright, onward we go - Chapter five! And, again, thanks for all the reviews and keep 'em coming! And a pre-warning; I apologize in advance if this chapter seems a bit long, drawn out, and just a little pointless - I didn't do it on purpose but that's how it came out. I tribute it to Hiccup's long wait, and that impatience we all feel when waiting for something we feel we can't possibly wait for (like a certain movie that is coming out on a certain Friday in a certain month that a certain someone has been counting down for over a year for)

Wow, a long introâ€¦.anywayâ€¦

Chapter 5 Three Days

Hiccup had never been so anxious. He had come back to the smithy, ate what he could swallow, and tried to sleep. Rolling and twitching on his cot, Hiccup was drowning in the hours. The candle was burning so slowlyâ€¦

The life-brew must boil for three days, according to the woman. Somehow Hiccup felt comfortable with her waiting beside it. He wanted these three days to be over. For three days Hiccup had to wait to see the results of all this toiling. He wanted to be the one to be waiting beside itâ€¦but he was almost afraid of what could happen.

Hiccup tried to focus on something else at his workstation but his mind was so scattered that he couldn't. It was all he could think aboutâ€¦she was all he could think about. So he was reduced to lying on his back on the cot, staring at the ceiling grow dark as the candle burnt itself out.

He must have fallen asleep, for his dreams were streaked with violence water, pale bones, and bubbling blood. He tossed and rolled, over and over, trying to escape the dreams. But he rolled fitfully and landed with a thud on the floor, waking himself abruptly.

He lay there with the cold floor against his cheek. Pulling himself to a sitting position, he rubbed the chilled place on his cheek. Was it morning yet? It could be his excuse to get out of this little closet. He could take Toothless up, far from the island, to somewhere he could forget about it all for a wholeâ€¦maybe he could stay away

for the three days, camp out on the outlying islands.

Eventually, the village came to life outside. Hiccup heard Vikings doing chores in the village. Gobber came into the smithy, and soon the banging of rock on steel, steel on steel. There was the humming and singing that Gobber filled his spaces with.

"Ah, you must be looking for Hiccup. He's in there, go on now." Gobber's voice drifted through the shop.

By the tone of his voice Gobber could only be talking with either a dragon or a child. Hiccup sighed, it would only be a matter of time before Toothless came looking for him. It's better he slept in the stables tonight, or else he would have stirred every time Hiccup had.

Yes, it was Toothless. Hiccup could hear his footsteps and the swish of his tail on the ground.

Toothless stuck his head into Hiccup's closet-room, eyes full of boundless energy. "Morning, Toothless." Hiccup said, with a gentle hand on the dragon's nose. He gave a cheerful snort.

"Hiccup, you finally awake?" Gobber called from the forge.

"Yeah." Hiccup stifled a yawn. Toothless moved out of the way for Hiccup, bouncing outside the smithy, waiting expectantly for his rider and his morning flight.

"You're dad's been looking for you. Came by about three times." Gobber said, holding his hammer-hand above a bent red-hot blade. "He didn't come right out and say it, but I'm pretty sure it had something to do a certain lady friendâ€|"

Hiccup groaned, the last of the sleep residue gone and the weight of reality back.

"You know you can't avoid her forever." Gobber said, bringing the hammer down. "Might as well make nice."

"Yeah, yeah, easier said than done." Hiccup stretched his shoulder. He must have slept on it wrong.

"What happened to you?" Gobber asked abruptly, pointing his hammer-hand at Hiccup's poorly bandaged hand. He quickly removed it from Gobber's view.

"Oh, Iâ€|uh, fell. Accidentally. On my hand. Iâ€|uh, caught myself, on something sharp." Hiccup said, knowing how stupid his excuse sounded. Gobber raised an eyebrow but didn't push the issue.

"Right, well your father is still looking for you." Gobber said, heaving the red-hot sword into the water with a steaming hiss. "And he's got a hangover is I ever saw one so I wouldn't try him."

Hiccup sighed. The sun was bright and the village buzzing, making up for the previous day. He'd have to make some kind of appearance today. Toothless hopped in a circle, giving Hiccup the eager-dragon stare.

"I know, bud. I'd like to vanished up there too." Hiccup padded him, and Toothless sighed, shaking his head in disagreement.

Three days. Hiccup had three days to wait, to stew in his impatience, to dread the possible outcomes. It'd all left him with a pit in his stomach that grew in vast expanses when he thought about that secluded cave up there in the mountain where the dark water was boiling away, under the watchful eyes of a stranger.

Hiccup was found by his father halfway to the village's center, his booming voice reaching high above anyone else's.

The way he boomed "Hiccup!" through the village, there was no way out. He'd been seen and everyone on the island knew it. Vikings shrugged away from him, separating him and Toothless like they were diseased, or in trouble, but stayed close enough to hear the oncoming conversation. Scaggs stayed within a few steps of Stoick, like a adoring younger brother.

"Son, there you are. Where in Thor's name have you been?" Stoick said through a grin, although his voice was restrained from anything similar to anger, but there was a blaze Hiccup had come to recognize in his eyes.

Esol was standing not far away standing between what looked like a engrossing conversation between Snotlout and Tuffnut, both standing a little taller and puffed. If it wasn't for his father, Hiccup might have laughed.

"Oh, you know, here and there." Hiccup shrugged.

"Well, never mind that, you're here now." Stoick shook his head, a wave surging through his massive beard. "We thought it might be nice if you took Esol on a flight. Our neighbors still have doubts that dragons are anything but beasts."

"I said I don't trust anything that can eat me in a single bite." Scaggs said, pointing a finger in the air. "Or anything that once tried."

They shared a friendly laugh.

"Alright, Toothless is due for a morning run." Hiccup said, patting the dragon next to him on the nose, who seemed eager with the news.

Esol walked over, her face showing a fake entertainment, most likely happy to escape the winning talk that usually ran between Vikings. They shared a knowing glance; they were going to share another awkward afternoon together in an attempt to push them beyond that friend zone.

Hiccup motioned her to follow him, a few steps away from the entire village watching their every move. When they were at least out of the main horde, Hiccup held out his hand to help her up onto the saddle. A bit timid, she looked stiff and unnatural on a dragon. It reminded him of the first time Astrid rode Toothless, although she was a twinge more furious than Esol.

Hiccup climbed up, and advised her to hold on. She gingerly laced her

fingers around his waist. With a swoosh, Toothless soar straight upward in his eagerness to leave the ground. The village vanished beneath a cloud and the ocean stretched forever.

"My, this is incredible!" Esol gasped. She looked down, and tightened her grip around Hiccup.

"Traveling is never the same." Hiccup said.

"Your father has been fussing over you like nothing else." Esol said in a chit-chat way, but with an unnerved undertone, the entire idea of being on a dragon soaring at inhuman speeds over the blue expanse one that takes a few laps to get used to. She was trying to talk to distract herself. "He told us all about how you brought the Vikings and dragons together, and how you bravely be friendly a deadly Night Fury, and battling the ferocious Red Death all by yourself. It's quite the tale."

"I'm not the war hero that me makes me out to be." Hiccup half-laughed. He'd heard the tale a multitude of times. His father embellished it a little more with each retelling so that today's story was further from the desperate crap-shoot that it was. Of course, no one but him was there to know that he was absolutely terrified and acting out of impulse the entire time and he wasn't the one to correct them. "And I had help. I couldn't have done anything without Toothless, or the other riders."

"Of course." Esol said. "I've heard as much about Toothless as I have you. It seems he's really something special, even in dragon standards."

"He is." Hiccup said, patting Toothless in admiration. They jumped above a wispy cloud and soared downward toward the water in a even sweep. Hiccup thought of Astrid's first flight on Toothless, the beginning of dragons and Vikings living together.

"Soâ€|this really wasn't my idea. Our fathers were talking and they were talking about how to get us together, you know, like no one could hear them. But I guess you got someone to fall in love with you by taking them on a dragon ride."

>Hiccup sighed. "Yeah. That was before Vikings and dragons were friends, and I was training Toothless in secret outside of the village. Astrid followed me one day and found us, and when she tried to run and expose me Iâ€|kind of kidnapped her and forced her to see what it was like to ride a dragon. I thought that maybe I could convince her that they weren't what we thought, by showing her what I'd seen."<p>

"And it worked?" Esol asked when Hiccup paused.

"It did." Hiccup said. They were miles above the village and there wasn't anyone else even closer, he didn't feel ashamed to speak freely. "You know that was the first time she even gave me a second glance, or a first one for that matter."

"You mean it wasn't love at first sight?" Esol laughed, her voice a little easier now that they have leveled out, leaving the ups and downs behind.

Hiccup laughed. "Oh, no. Before Toothless Astrid wouldn't have looked

at me if she was one fire and I had the only bucket of water on the island." (Love that line!)

Esol joined in his laughter.

"Was it love at first sight with you?" Hiccup asked.

She laughed again, but it was mixed with pity. "It was, actually. Cheesy and stupid, I know, but it was. We saw each other and we justâ€¦connected. It was likeâ€¦like we'd known each other forever. It was like a story of true love. One that we have to keep a secret because our families disagree, only talking through letters." She said dreamily.

"That is really cheesy." Hiccup agreed.

"Hey!" Esol laughed. "I wouldn't have it any other way. I wouldn't want to have to work so hard to love, or to find someone that'd love me back. Love shouldn't have to be soâ€¦difficult."

It shouldn't have to be difficultâ€¦Hiccup mulled over those words. It seemed that everything in his memory associated with Astrid had a certain degree of difficulty. Getting her attention at first had been a trick of luck. Keeping her attention was easy; he just had to be himself. She was a bit reckless on the battlefield which was a constant worry, one that he never go used to. Losing her was horrible, a difficulty that was beyond comprehension even after he'd lived through it. And now bring her back was nothing but difficult.

"Soâ€¦what have you been doing?" Esol asked, breaking the silence that Hiccup hadn't noticed until she spoke.

Hiccup sighed. "Not much, avoiding my father mostly." It wasn't a complete lie.

"You know, Hiccup, I may not be very useful in life but I do have good ears. I can tell the difference between a lie and a half-truth. If you need to talk to someone here I am. The best part is you won't see me ever again after a few days. Besides, I confessed my secret love affair to you so you can rat one me if I rat on you."

They were so far above and away from anyone else, talking didn't sound like a bad idea. At the moment it sounded like a good idea, alleviating. But he remembered his promise to the strange woman to never speak of it. But hadn't see made him promise to not speak of what they'd spoken of that day? What about what he'd done?

"Alright." Hiccup said. "I think there's a way to bring someone back from the dead."

"What?" Esol gasped. "Sorry, please continue."

"I know it sounds crazy and impossible, butâ€¦I think it might be possible. I can't tell you how exactly, but that's what I've been doing. The dirty work is done and now I've got a bit of downtime. Three days, to be exact." Hiccup said.

"You really liked her, didn't you?" Esol asked in her dreamy voice.

"To be willing to risk playing with the arcane. I've heard stories, more of rumors and legends, of people playing with darkness. It seems that horrible things always happen to them."

"Yes, I did. I do." Hiccup said. "Enough that when I thought there might be even the smallest chance to see her again, I took it."

"I think it's romantic. Crazy, but romantic." Esol said, but then her tone turned serious. "But let's say that it works and in three days your girl is walking around, quite alive. What is everyone going to say? People are going to notice that she'd not dead anymore."

"Yeahâ€¦I figured I'd worry about that when the time came." Hiccup shrugged. He'd given it a little bit of thought, but never more than that. "I guess I still have my doubts."

"Well then, why are you going to all this trouble?" Esol asked.

"I don't know." Hiccup sighed. "Maybe it's desperation."

"Loves does both good and bad." Esol sighed. "It will make the darkest day as bright as the sun and the coldest night hotter. But it can burn worse than fire, freeze harder than ice, and twist the blade with more scorn than any hand. That's something by mother used to say."

"It feels true." Hiccup nodded.

"But enough of all this mushy stuff. Tell me about how you trained Toothless. I'd like to hear the story from the person who lived it." Esol said with childlike wonder.

"It's not as fantastic as everyone thinks." Hiccup laughed. He'd heard some of the others tell it like he was a master of dragons, capable of reading their minds. Hiccup started with how he'd shot down a Night Fury in hopes of gaining respect from his father and the tribe, but when he went to finish the job he couldn't do it. The rest was trial and error, and before he knew it he was changing history.

The majority of the day went the same; talking and flying. They landed that evening and ate with the rest of the tribe in the Great Hall. They received the normal stares from passing Vikings. They were the stares of people assuming they were two young love birds returning fresh from a day-long date. As far as any of them were concerned they'd had a fine day together. Only Hiccup and Esol knew that it was all a game.

That evening they were more or less left alone, in hopes that their relationship had finally bloomed. They made light chatter for the sake of entertainment. They left the great hall together, as to not leave the other to the ravenous gossip of the townspeople. Toothless jumped as they left. They walked together for a short ways and then parted; she onto the house and he to the smithy.

Toothless nudged him as they reached the smithy.

"Go on to the stables, bud." Hiccup said, patting Toothless's nose. He was exhausted, the previous night's lack of sleep catching up to

him. Toothless gave a whine but headed passed the smithy to the stables. Hiccup washed his face in the cool water in the forge and then crawled into the cot. It felt much more comforting than it had the night before.

The morning of the second day came without fitful night of waking up on the floor. Toothless was outside with Esol. The two of them must have become friends in the moments they'd left him sleep.

"Good morning." Esol said in a sing-song voice.

"Morning." Hiccup yawned.

They were being watched by Vikings, from windows and spying glances while they were doing daily chores. It would seem that their flight had gotten around town.

"What do you say to a flight before breakfast?" Esol said, blinking her brown eyes toward the sky.

"Sure." Hiccup said. He got the message. She wanted to talk without worrying about being overheard.

They were again soaring above the village and away from prying ears. A layer of clouds separating them from anyone else.

"So, according to the grapevine we are planning our wedding up here." Esol laughed.

"So what did you want to talk about?" Hiccup asked.

"I need your help. I want to send a letter but I can't get away from my father, or yours, to write it." Esol said, a bit irritated.

"To your long distance boyfriend?" Hiccup asked.

"Yes." Esol said. "I have a plan. To escape together. I came up with it last night after thinking about all you were doing for love. I thought I could do a little more."

"Really?" Hiccup asked, a bit of guilt emerging for whatever plan she could create.

"Yes, I figure that if I love him so much I should fight to keep him, not fall backward when the going gets rough." Esol said. "Our letters go through Trader Johan, and he managed to slip me a letter, although I had to read it in the few moments I had to myself. It seems that he is being pushed into an arranged marriage. If we hurry we can run off together, but if we wait much longer we will lose our chance."

"You think a letter would reach him in time?" Hiccup asked.

"Maybe. Trader Johan is still here, right? And he goes southward after he leaves Berk, so he'll get the letter soon if I get it out to Johan before he leaves." Esol optimistically grinned.

"But what's your plan?" Hiccup asked.

"We'll both runaway and meet somewhere. A place we both know. From there we'll go somewhere else and start a life together." Esol

sighed.

"How are you going to meet?" Hiccup said. He saw some large holes in this simple plan.

"Iâ€¦don't know." She said, deflated. "I thought about hiding on Johan's ship, stowing away. Then when we meet we can run away."

"It would be easier if you had a dragon." Hiccup said.

"Yes, I thought about that too. But I don't think I could ride a dragon all the way there. I don't know the way, and I don't know dragons very well either." Esol shrugged.

"Dragons are intelligent, some have an incredible internal compass." Hiccup said.

"Then we could fly away together." Esol sighed.

"All you need is a dragon." Hiccup said. "And I think I can help with that."

They flew downward toward the village, to the dragon stables. Dragons slept there by night and roamed by day. During the day dragons were out with their riders and like Toothless had been doing, they'd come back to the stables at dusk. The dragons were free to come and go, but one sulking Deadly Nadder hadn't stopped pouting.

"Hey there, Stormfly." Hiccup called, and the blue and yellow dragon sighed as she turned her head groggily, eyes half closed.

"Is she alright?" Esol asked, looking at the laying dragon cautiously.

"Yeah, mostly." Hiccup said, stroking the depressed dragon's head sympathetically. She shared Hiccup's loss. "She was Astrid's dragon, and after sheâ€¦died, Stormfly wasn't the same. She knew that Astrid wasn't coming back. I come by every once in a while to take her up. She's a good dragon, just lonely, and heartbroken."

Esol looked between Hiccup and Stormfly and understood. "You want me to take her?"

"Yes." Hiccup nodded. "Deadly Nadders have an excellent sense of direction. For an extra measure I can fit a compass into the saddle. And she could use the attention. She can fly you where you need to go and when you're wherever you're going she'll fly back here if you tell her."

"Are you sure?" Esol asked, hope flooding her cheeks. Then she lowered her voice. "Butâ€¦what will Astrid think if she comes back?"

"Astrid won't want her sulking in here forever." Hiccup shrugged. "And she'd be happy that Stormfly was helping someone else."

"Thank you!" Esol clapped her hands to her mouth, a short jump in his feet. She walked carefully over to Stormfly, and gently patted her nose. "I'll send her back, I promise. Unless something horrible happens. That way you know if she doesn't return then we have all

died."

"Let's stay on the positive side until we can't." Hiccup said.

Hiccup spent most of the day helping the two bond. Esol had never been around dragons and had a lot to learn about taking care of one. But Stormfly was used to people and well trained. They just needed to like each other which was turning out to be easy.

"Chicken is her favorite." Hiccup said, handing a cold chicken leg to Esol. "Feeding a dragon is a great way to build trust. Nadders have a blind spot directly in front of them. That's why she turns her head to look. She's fast, nimble, and has pinpoint accuracy, and is just a little vain."

By sundown the two were getting along great. Stormfly was acting almost like her old self and Esol was glowing with hope that her plan might work. It was nice seeing them both so happy although it was strange to see anyone else on Stormfly but Astrid. If all things go as planned she might be back in the saddle in a few weeks.

After sunset they went for a short flight around the village. Esol wasn't as comfortable riding solo as she'd need to be for such a long journey. Hiccup was riding beside her on Toothless, advising as they went. In just one short hour Esol was flying like she had for years. She was determined to get the hang of it.

They landed back at the stables to drop the dragons off. Stormfly hadn't had that much activity for a while and showed her exhaustion.

"You know, I'm starting to believe it's possible." Esol said with an extra kick in her step on the way back to the house. "If I fly there, then there's no need for a letter."

"I'm glad I could help." Hiccup said. Nothing they said was safe here on the ground.

"Thank you, again, Hiccup." Esol said and smiled as she vanished into his own house.

Hiccup started back down to the smithy. Her best chance to escape Berk without anyone noticing will be at night. That way by the time anyone notices that she's missing she'll have an entire night ahead of them. Seeing her so hopeful gave him his own hope that everything will work out.

On the morning of the third day Hiccup felt his heart thump. This time tomorrow he would have his answer. Either Astrid would be here or she wouldn't. Either way, it would be over.

Hiccup was fidgety. He couldn't sit still. He met Esol at the great hall, ate breakfast underneath the assuming stares of the other Vikings. Shortly after they took to the skies to continue their practice. Through the morning and afternoon, they didn't even stop for lunch.

"Hiccup, I want to leave tonight." Esol said.

"Are you sure you're up for it?" Hiccup said.

"With today's flying I know I am." Esol said. "Besides, we should always be prepared to follow our hearts."

She was right. Hiccup thought.

They couldn't fly until dusk. Stormfly needed her rest if she was going to fly all night. Hiccup took Esol back to the smithy where he fitted a compass onto Stormfly's saddle. He helped her pack enough food for two and supplies. He couldn't help but throwing in what advise he thought of, like plants he knew were poisonous.

Esol was as on edge about her secret departure as Hiccup was about returning to the cave that night. They shared a short dinner at the smithy. Hiccup and Esol stayed up late, making sure than people saw her that night. When the village was wound down they made their way back up to the stables with the modified saddle and supplies in tow.

"What are you going to say?" Esol asked.

"That we stayed up talking and I led you back to the house late last night, and that was the last I saw you." Hiccup said.

"You promise to keep it a secret?" She said as she climbed onto Stormfly's back.

"I never saw you again." Hiccup said, nodding.

"Thank you, Hiccup." Esol said.

He climbed onto Toothless and took a few moments after Esol did. He and Toothless hovered as Esol and Stormfly faded into the inky distance. Once they were out of sight he steered Toothless toward the clouds that circled the tops of the mountain. His heart was beating erratically.

He didn't have to wait any longer.

The flew right inside the cave and Toothless knew the way. They came to the dark altar chamber and landed, Hiccup slid from the saddle, his heart in his throat. The strange woman was standing over a boiling, frothing tub. The water was furious and the froth was a bright blue.

"You are just in time." The woman said as Hiccup came to stand beside her.

He couldn't feel his legs. What he could feel what shaking uncontrollably.

And that's chapter 5! Tune in next week for the continuing adventures, in Chapter 6: Rebirth!

6. Chapter 6: Rebirth

Thanks for all the reviews, team! I admit, I had a rough outline for the entire story but this chapter is where the better organized part

of the outline ends. Well, the rest is organized too, just lesser so - there's still an outline, don't fret! It had a beginning and end before I posted it, I made sure of that, so there wouldn't be this wispy not-ending thing happening on my end.

And now, the moment we've all been waiting for!

Chapter 6: Rebirth

Stoick did not sleep as soundly as their visitors. He had kept his drinking on the lighter side the evening past. As chief, he needed to be within his own mind at all times, and his judgment sharp as an axe, especially when there were visitors to impress. Scaggs slept like the rock that he was. The two men with him snored and belched in his sleep. The house hadn't had this much noise since Hiccup was a babe.

A clap of thunder shuddered the island. Stoick shifted. Of all the years and all the storms he'd slept through, sailed through, fought through, he hadn't heard such thunder. It was violent and close, so suddenly present. There were no signs that day of a night storm.

Between the beating of hearts and emptying of lungs, there was something else in the air that night. Something he wasn't familiar with. It was somethingâ€¦off. It was a subtle change, like how the air had a fiery scent right before a dragon attack. Stoick filled his chest with the air trying, to identify its meaning.

He pushed himself up and to his feet. He needn't tiptoe. These Vikings could sleep through Oden's wrath. He pulled the door open just enough to see outside.

The whole world had a strange glow emanating from a source Stoick couldn't see. The clouds were stirring, black and gray, hiding the glittering stars behind them. Those were no ordinary storm clouds. They were too darkâ€¦sinister. There was a bone-chilling wind that blew against the village, blowing off the high mountain ice. It was joined by a growing abundance of high toned howling, unlike any dragon or bird he'd ever heard. He caught glimpses of the moon's sliver, fighting to poke through the thick clouds in weaker places. It was a fiery red, like fresh blood, the color of life.

Stoick inhaled the cool air. Yes, something was off this night. Something was more than offâ€¦something was very much wrong. But what could cast the entire sky into such a fiery black duel? He sighed, with any luck no one else would see this strange scene and start an uproar. The last thing he needed was superstitious Vikings crying Oden's Wrath.

Stoick took one last long look outside before closing the door. On his way back to bed a deep seeded fear seared against his gut and rose into this throat. Had hiccup done something? What in Thor's name could his foolish brokenhearted son do?

Hiccup knelt beside the stone basin alongside the strange woman. The frothing slopped up and out, but did not remain still as water should. It was pulled back into the tub like limp tentacles.

The woman stood up and retreated a few feet from the water. Hiccup

thought he should follow her lead and began to push himself from the floor, his legs were useless and his arms were flimsy.

"Stay where you are, boy. She does not know me." The woman said, motioning a dark skinned hand toward the water.

Hiccup felt a surge in his chest, fear, excitement, hope. He looked back to the water. Something was moving inside, underneath the water. Somethingâ€¦white. Could it beâ€¦could it possibly be? It had grown terrible cold in the cave, like a fire had just gone out. The frothing, boiling water suddenly stopped. Before the water's surface could grow still a pale, white hand grasped through the surface, clutching at anything.

Hiccup's heart nearly stopped. In reflex he reached for the hand and held onto it, feeling a fearful grip return the favor. The hand was followed by a wet blonde head gasping for air, coughing water from her throat. With Hiccup's help she clawed her way from the water, blue eyes wide with confusion and fear, blinking to rid them of the water. Naked and shivering, her pale skin was simmering, the yellow-fire reflecting in the wet.

Hiccup pulled her into his arms and wrapped himself around her shaking shoulders. Water was soaking through his shirt from her hair but he didn't care.

"Astrid?" Hiccup asked, barely about to mumble the words. Her shoulder was underneath his hand, his skin against hers. She felt so alive, so realâ€¦those blue eyes and yellow hair, the face was Astrid's, but was it really her? "Astrid?"

She didn't speak, but those blue eyes darted to his face, meeting his eyes. A surge like fire ran through his body. His hands didn't hurt anymore, his anxiety was gone. She was so cold. He tried to hold her against him, shield her from the frigid cave air. She wasn't fighting him but she wasn't helping.

The strange woman appeared beside him with a fur cloak in her outstretched hand. Hiccup took it and wrapped it around Astrid's body. Hiccup was beginning to feel that same doubt gnawing at the back of his mind. Astrid was not complacent. She should have known him, said something, anything. He rubbed her shoulder, wanting a reaction. Had something gone wrong after all?

A pale hand reached out from inside the fur and gripped the front of Hiccup's shirt. Her grip was loose, her fingers cold. Suddenly, the grip tightened into a fierce hold.

"Hiccup?" Astrid's voice, one he thought he'd never hear again, spoke. It was dry and hoarse, but hers. At the sound of her voice Hiccup couldn't keep it inside. His overwhelming joy erupted in a weak laughter, hugging her tight.

She pulled on his shirt. The initial shock was worn off, the confusion turning into skepticism as she peered around the cave.

"Are you alright?" Hiccup asked. What should he ask someone fresh from death?

"Hiccup? What happened?" Astrid asked, her voice steady. Raspy still, though it was warm and strong.

"You're back." Hiccup said, still in disbelief.

"Butâ€¦|whatâ€¦|I don't understand. What happened? Where are we?" Astrid said, bringing her fist with his shirt clutched inside closer to herself. His cheek was resting against her temple, wet hair sticking to his chin.

"Berk, in a cave high on the mountain." Hiccup said. "You don't remember anything?"

Astrid shifted inside the fur cloak. She became aware of her nakedness, and drew the fur around her tighter with a flush in her cheeks. She looked into the waters from where she'd come. The surface was dark and still.

"Hiccup, what happened?" Astrid asked again, this time her tone meant a straight answer.

"It's kind of weird to explain. What can you remember?" Hiccup asked.

"I remember flying, with you," her pale hand held her midsection where the arrow had pierced her. Her eyes were focusing on something unseen, her mind working through her memories. "â€¦|and I was hurt, badâ€¦|.Hiccup, did I die?"

"You did, but you're alive." Hiccup said. Her turned back to him, her blue eyes narrowed in scrutiny. That look, she made it all the time. He wondered for a moment if she realized that.

"How?" Astrid asked, a temper in her voice that was only hers. She looked around the cave. "What is all this?"

Hiccup inhaled. He'd have to explain it sooner or later. Only, he wished it could be later. But she was looking at him with that face, those eyes. There would be no later, it was now.

"It's complicating." Hiccup said. "I'm not sure exactly what I did."

"He summoned your soul back from the dead." the strange woman said. Hiccup had forgotten that she was there. "Tell me, child, what do you remember last?"

Astrid looked at her, then at Hiccup, and back to the water. The woman knelt with a quickness that made them both jump. She was looking at Astrid with those dark eyes, unblinking, looking for what, Hiccup didn't know.

"It was dark, like being asleep, like dreaming." Astrid said, unsure of the woman. "Iâ€¦|I remember being pulled. Was that you?"

"I think so." Hiccup nodded.

The woman drew closer to Astrid, who then inched closer to Hiccup. The woman reached out her boney hand and grabbed Astrid's, pulling it toward her. She examined Astrid's pale hand with her black

eyes.

With one of her hands occupied the grip on the fur slipped. The other hand tried to hold it around her, but with the woman holding her arm it was an awkward feat. Hiccup held the fur around her shoulders, feeling where the water from her hair soaked into it.

"It seems, all has gone well." the strange woman said. She let go of Astrid's hand, which she then quickly pulled back to herself.

"Who are you?" Astrid asked, the undertone of distrust loud and clear.

"A friend." said the woman.

"She's alright." Hiccup reassured her.

"You brought me back to life?" Astrid said after a pause. There was a mix of disappointment, admiration, and uncertainty in her voice that was reflected in her eyes.

"You'd rather me not?" Hiccup said. Astrid moved, and Hiccup moved with her to help her stand. She held the fur tight with both hands. He leaned down and kissed her wet head.

"Noâ€¦it's justâ€¦I don't know." Astrid said. She sighed, it must be overwhelming. Hiccup wondered what she was thinking. How could it feel to have been dead, and then be dead no longer. He wouldn't have believed it, either. "I don't know what to think."

Toothless, who had been weary at the back of the cavern, shouted when he saw Astrid. He perked up, and bounded forward to greet her with a friendly lick-in-the-face. Astrid laughed, and let one hand go of the fur to pet the dragon.

"He missed you too." Hiccup said at the dragon's sudden enthusiasm.

"How long have I been gone?" Astrid asked, casual as weather.

"A year." Hiccup said.

"A year?" Astrid said in disbelief. She tried to recover but the overall shock was still evident. "I was wondering why you were taller."

Hiccup laughed. He had missed her, too.

"Oden's beardâ€¦what have I missed?" Astrid sighed.

"I'll tell you all about it on the way back to the village." Hiccup said. "There's a warm bed and dry clothes."

"Sounds great." Astrid said.

Hiccup lifted her onto the saddle, the fur around her like a swaddled child. He climbed on behind her, holding onto her with one arm and directing Toothless with the other. Hiccup began to tell her of the passed year as they navigated through the dark cave and out to the cloudy night. There were heavy clouds lingering, as if a storm had

just passed. The cave must be sound. Hiccup didn't hear anything from inside.

The village was dark and it would be easy to slip into the smithy unnoticed. As they landed soundlessly beside it Hiccup was finishing his story of his father's efforts to find him a wife. He'd just gone through a brief list of the strange females he'd been forced with.

"Does your dad not think you can find your own?" Astrid asked as Hiccup lit a candle in his closet at the smithy.

"Apparently, not since you." Hiccup shrugged. He patted Toothless on the nose. "It's alright Bud, we'll see you in the morning."

"Where is he going?" Astrid asked.

"The stables. There's not much room in here and he can eat there too." Hiccup said. Astrid stared at him. "Oh, right, we added some dragon stables to the island while you were gone. This way they have somewhere to go, and eat, and whatnot."

Hiccup found some old clothes of his tucked away in the smithy. He handed them to her. She took them on a single outstretched hand. She gave him a look.

"Hiccup." Astrid said.

"What?"

"Turn around!" Astrid punched his shoulder lightly, and he moved with the forced and turned to face the shut door. He heard the fur fall from her shoulders in a heap on the floor. The swish of wool against wool, against flesh.

"Hiccup, if I'm supposed to be dead then what is everyone going to think when I'm not?" Astrid asked.

"I don't know." Hiccup shrugged. He chanced it, and turned around. She was standing with her arms folded. Her hair was mostly dry, and hung down in clustered waves.

"You didn't think this through?" Astrid asked.

"Are you mad that I didn't?" Hiccup asked. He'd been putting it off, but now was the time to think about these things.

She sighed. "I guess not."

Hiccup walked over to her and sat on the cot. He gestured to her and she sat down beside him. He felt the need to justify himself, and if anyone should know, it's Astrid. "I couldn't stop thinking about you. Astrid, I did this because I missed you, I love you."

"Hiccup," Astrid said, unsure of how to proceed. "I love you too, but, is it worth it? People die all the time, we can't just go around bringing them back because we miss them."

"I know, Astrid, I know." Hiccup said. He loved the sound of her name on his tongue. "I was approached with the option, I didn't come to

this on my own. The woman in the cave asked me if I wanted to see you again, and if there was the slightest chance, I was going to take it."

"That's sweet, Hiccup." Astrid said, her sharp words ebbing. "But, what now?"

"I wish I knew." Hiccup shrugged. "I guessâ€¦wait until the morningâ€¦or later tomorrow. I mean, we can't hide you forever."

"Hiccup, I don't know what people will do. All it will take is one push from the back of the crowd to send them calling for my head. It's unnatural, and they won't see past that. And, what is your dad going to think?"

"Oh, gods, I don't know." Hiccup shook his head. He could already see the disappointment, anger, and Thor knows what else when he finds out. "But, whatever happens I'll deal with it. We'll deal with it, together."

Astrid smiled at him, a light flush coming back over her cheeks. Between them, their fingers intertwined.

"Tell me what else has happened. Don't leave out anything." Astrid said, inching closer so that their intertwined hands had no room between them, so instead they found a spot to lay on Hiccup's thigh.

"Well, we've got a neighboring tribe visiting right now." Hiccup told her. He'd nearly forgotten about it already.

"Oh, complete with a lovely lady?" Astrid said, a grin on her lips.

Hiccup laughed. "Yeah, you could say that." He told her about his father and Scaggs, and about Esol. He tried to tell the story as chronological as he could.

"Wait, you are going to help her runaway?" Astrid said, her voice between disapproval and approval.

"Yes, but it's for a good cause." Hiccup said.

"You're right." Astrid said. "Butâ€¦aren't people going to notice when she's just gone? And he's just gone?"

"Probably. But it's too late to worry about that now." Hiccup shrugged. "She made her decision."

"Wait, 'made'?" Astrid asked.

"Yeahâ€¦she left earlier tonight. She left at night so she'd have a day of flying between her and the ships. They won't be able to make up the difference." Hiccup said. Then he remember the next part of the story and knew it was an unavoidable topic.

"She flew? I thought she'd never ridden a dragon before." Astrid said.

"She hadn't."

"Then how did you train one so fast?" Astrid asked, a twinge in her brow told Hiccup she was already thinking what he was trying not to think. His lack of speech and choking words turned that twinge into a frown. "What did you do?"

"Nothing, but she just borrowed one of ours." Hiccup said. Hiccup didn't know that when he was avoiding the truth he avoided the eyes of whomever he was talking to. Astrid, however, knew this.

"Borrowed?" Astrid said, in a deflated anger. "Stormfly?"

Hiccup nodded. He saw the immediate reaction in Astrid's face. Like taking a toy away from a child; their eyes looking up, trying to understand why someone would do such a thing. Her eyes were the worst kind of daggers. They were shooting daggers of knowing he had disappointed someone.

"And she'd gone?" Astrid said.

"Yes, but she'll come back. You know Stormfly, she's got excellent direction. Esol said she'd send her home when she got to where she was going. She promised." Hiccup said, mostly to reassure Astrid. He couldn't remember if she had promised or not. Astrid's anger had faded, and he was unsure what was left behind it. Was that sadness in her eyes?

"That was a good thing you did, Hiccup." Astrid said.

Hiccup sighed in relief. She might have still been angry, but she understood his reasons. He remembering something Esol had said, "If we love something, or someone, we should fight to keep them, or it."

Her smile returned, a bit deflated, but still there. There was that moment when their eyes meet, a mutual feeling bounding between them. Astrid acted on it first. She leaned in, and Hiccup mirrored her. Her lips were soft, warm, and so welcoming.

They'd kissed, but not like this. There was something more behind them, something Hiccup could only describe as love. He felt her hands touch his jaw, palms gingerly tracing lines along his chin and wrapping around his neck. He wanted to touch her, bring her as close as he could. He slinked his arms around her closing what little space had still been between them.

Astrid lingered on his lips, glancing up at him. She smiled, and he caught the smile and returned it.

"Anything else exciting happen?" Astrid asked in a whisper. She didn't need to speak any louder.

They talked well into the night. They both grew tired but neither wanted to cut the night short. Hiccup wanted to catch every moment with her. He wanted this moment to last. What if this was all a dream and would vanish if he succumbed to sleep? They were so busy talking that they missed the red glint on the moon, the violent swishing of the fading dark clouds.

Hiccup knew the morning would bring madness, anger, and confusion. He wanted to hold off the dawn as long as he could. But he knew that sleep would win out eventually. When he could no longer keep his head on his shoulders he pulled Astrid down to the cot, their legs intermingled, her head resting comfortably on his chest, her hand clutching onto the side of his shirt.

Aaaaand that's Chapter 6!

Fun fact - the scene where Hiccup is helping Astrid out of the water was the first scene that I actually had, and this entire story stemmed from it. Speaking of scenes, I outline a really awesome one that's coming a bit later. I contribute it to the weather last night - because it was storming something fierce. I always write better and more creatively when it's thundering and lightening out - electromagnetic energy or something.

Anyway, tune in next week for chapter seven which is currently unnamed. Maybe during the edit session I'll find one.

7. Chapter 7: An Old Story

Thanks for all the reviews! I admire your support! Admireâ€|that's not the word I want to use, but I can't place the one that I do want. So I'm sticking with admire. Onward!

Chapter 7: An Old Story

Stoick roused with the sun, something he only did when sleep had been tremulous. He hadn't slept more than ten minutes at a time, waking with irritation in his limbs, wanting to move about and stretch out their weariness. It had been such a terrible night that when the first rays of sun pushed through the easternmost clouds he welcomed them with gratitude.

No one else in the village seemed at all irked about the strange weather the previous night. He assumed it was because no one else had noticed it and left it at that. He did, however, intend to track down his wayward son and have a chat. He was neglecting the guests and Stoick had a deep set feeling that Hiccup saw the strangeness in the skies. If he were to be chief someday they he'll need to learn vigilance.

Stoick went outside and into the village. There was something rewarding about another sunrise, like the morning after a victorious and bloody battle, known only to those who survived, the victors. It was a reward for surviving another night. It was a promise that there would be another day. It came with the possibility of another victory, another sunrise.

Stoick made a chief's lap around the village checking that all was as it should be. And to his learned eye, it was. However that suddenly came crashing down around him. Scaggs and his few men from the house met him at the village's heart, a terror upon his aged face that Stoick had never seen.

"What is it?" Stoick asked immediately.

"Stoick, my Esol, she is gone." Scaggs said, his voice fearful, angry, ashamed.

"What?" Stoick asked, the prospect of the girl vanishing from his own house impossible. "No, Esol is probably already in the village. With Hiccup, perhaps."

This idea seemed to dampen the fire, but not put it out. Scaggs let out a groan, and Stoick was unsure whether it be better Esol vanish altogether or be found to have slept the night with Hiccup. Either would have dire consequences for someone.

"Let us wait until the village is up and running before we panic." Stoick said to Scaggs. He had no plans to panic, or even worry. Doubtless Esol was in the village somewhere. Where could she have possibly gone?

Hiccup and Astrid lay tangled in each other. The daily commotion of the village outside was accompanied with extra sound this morning. Hiccup stirred first, and could not move without stirring Astrid. So for a moment while he waited for the last dregs of sleep to ease away, he admired how warm and soft the girl in his arms was. Her hair was spread out like a web, over his arm and between his fingers. Her breathing was even, the rhythm of life.

If only he could stay here a while longer, taking her in, after missing her presence for so long. But eventually Astrid began to stir, as if she knew that he was watching her, even in her sleep.

"Good morning." Hiccup said, her drowsy smile warming his insides like nothing else, melting, almost.

"Morning." She whispered.

There was something happening outside. The commotion was a bit more erratic? No, that wasn't the right word for it, Hiccup thought. It was different through.

"Stay here." Hiccup said as he untangled himself from her, a bit unwillingly.

She responded with a morning groan, stretching and rolling over. That was fine, Hiccup thought. He didn't want someone to just wandering in here, thinking the sounds of life were his, and having the surprise of a lifetime.

Hiccup walked outside the smithy and was greeted with the strangest attitudes. Some Vikings were glaring at him, judgmentally so, like he had burnt down his own house. Others had a sultry look about them, watching him pass them with a nodding approval. Did he miss something?

"Hiccup." Stoick was calling over the disarrayed crowd. He didn't sound happy at all, quite the opposite in fact.

"Yeah?" Hiccup answered back. If anyone knew what was going on, his father would.

"Son, have you seen Esol?" Stoick said to him. A few murmured

chuckles went through the crowd.

So that was it, Hiccup thought. They'd discovered that she was gone and had assumed that she'd been with him. He would normally have been peeved at the assuming glares and rumors, however given the circumstances he understood why they wanted to think that. It was either she was with him, or they had no idea where she was.

Time to lie.

"No, dad, I haven't seen her." Hiccup said.

There was an unrest through the crowd. Obviously, that was not the answer Stoick had wanted. His eyes narrowed at his son, urging him to fess up, this was not the time to cover tracks.

"Honest." Hiccup said. "I haven't seen her since yesterday."

"She's not with you in the smithy?" Stoick asked, making sure they were on the same page.

"No, of course not." Hiccup said. "I don't know her that well."

Stoick glared. Now was not the time for smart-mouthing, either. Truthfully, he hadn't seen her since the night before so it wasn't a lie. It just wasn't the entire truth. But that wasn't what Stoick asked. If he'd asked if he knew what happened to her, well that question was a bit more open ended and harder to go around. Hiccup had to play along, for his sake as well as Esol's, and the mysterious man she loved enough to abandon her father and tribe.

"Did you lose her?" Hiccup asked.

Stoick frowned.

Stoick sent word out through the village and soon everyone was gathering on the Great Hall's steps. Hiccup tried to sneak away to tell Astrid to stay in the smithy, to hide, or something but he couldn't get away from his father's sight. Stoick would bellow for him to stay put, that they'd need him.

Vikings were whispering, gossiping, and tossing rumors around. Hiccup stood at the stair's top landing just outside the Great Hall's doors. Stoick stood before the village with his leader's stance while Scaggs slumped behind him looking utterly defeated.

Stoick soon began to issue orders, quickly and with purpose. He divided the village into teams to search for Esol. Some went into the forest in several directions, some went to the beaches and coasts, other went seaward to the stacks and outlying islands.

"Hiccup," Stoick said while the search parties were heading out. "I want you to search from the sky. That dragon of yours is faster and can cover more ground."

"Sure." Hiccup nodded. "I'll get Toothless from the stables after I stop by the smithy. I...left my eyeglass there."

"Go now." Stoick said. He watched his son take the stairs two at a

time. He had been spending a lot of his time at the smithy. But he would worry about that later. There were more pressing matters. Where could that girl have run off to?

Hiccup ran through the village as fast as he dared. He didn't want to attract attention to him or the smithy. He tried to seem casual as he glided inside.

Astrid was still laying on the cot. When he shut the door behind him she stirred.

"What's going on?" Astrid said, sitting up. She hadn't slept since he left.

Hiccup put a finger to his lips. He whispered, "The village is searching for Esol. They think she just wandered off. I have to go help. Astrid, whatever you do, don't leave the smithy. If someone comes in here looking for Esol, hid."

"Alright." Astrid whispered in return.

"I'm serious, Astrid. They can't find you." Hiccup said, grabbing hold of her shoulders and staring into those ice blue eyes.

"I promise." Astrid said. "I won't be found on purpose."

"Alright, I've got to go. My dad is on high alert." Hiccup said, kissing her on the forehead as he left.

Hiccup left the smithy with his destination as the stables. He walked briskly, a mission of acting on his mind. He'd have to pretend to search. It would be hard looking for something he knew couldn't be found. The stables came into view and Toothless bounced happily toward Hiccup. He climbed onto the saddle and the dragon leaped into the air.

The search parties were like tiny ants, scrambling frantically. Hiccup sighed. He felt a twinge of guilt for knowing what had happened to Esol, but how could he confess that? He didn't know where she'd gone only that she had. He knew she wasn't on the island or near it. But how to tell his father?

As he flew above Berk, he was left with a lingering feeling of unease.

Stoick organized and operated the search from the village. He wanted to make sure she wasn't there. He saw Hiccup emerge from the smithy, his hands empty. Stoick watched him run to the stables and greet the night-colored dragon. He hadn't taken anything from the smithy, no eyeglass.

Did Hiccup lie to him? Why would he do that? Stoick scanned the smithy. He could feel it in the air, smell it. Something was off. He watched the black spec that was his son ride away from the village, and walked to the smithy. The forge was empty. Hiccup had a small workspace, a tiny space near the back.

He ducked under over-hanging shields and swords. The closet door was closed. He reached for the handle and pulled it open.

There was a candle burnt down to its end, and a few books and designs laying about. There was a blanket strewn half on the floor. Stoick reached for it and wadded it in his fist. Hiccup never could keep a space tidy. He dropped the blanket wad on the cot where it belonged.

It was a bit messy, but there wasn't anything there that shouldn't have been. Stoick exhaled with a huff and closed the door. He had more important things to do right now than examine his son's behavior.

Astrid listened as Stoick's heavy footsteps trailed away, out of the smithy. He let her held breath go in a sigh of relief. That had been a close one. If he hadn't telltale footsteps she would have been caught. As soon as she heard him coming she dove underneath the cot, throwing the blanket to the floor in the process. She'd held her breath as his large hand reached down.

She feared that he would look underneath, that his hand was going to press against the floor and his head would follow, piercing her with his suspicious eyes. But, to a great relief, he didn't.

She waited until there were no footsteps, and crawled out from under the cot. She sat on it, knowing the day would be a long one. What was she supposed to do in this tiny room?

Stoick met Gobber at the square.

"What's wrong?" Gobber asked.

"Nothing's wrong. I've got a missing Viking and an entire village searching, and one worry-sick chief." Stoick said in a exhale.

"Nah, I know about that." Gobber said. He had a knack for knowing Stoick's facial expression, a talent learned from many years spent as friends. "Is there anything else? You kind of have that distracted look."

Stoick grumbled. He changed the subject. "What are you up to?"

"Oh, Scaggs asked me to repair a few weapons before they take off. Something about wanting to be prepared for anything." Gobber said. He pointed to the wagon of swords, maces, hammers, and shields.

"Are they leaving?" Stoick asked.

"Eh, beats me, but Scaggs was mumbling about Esol leaving for home. I think he's just thinking whatever he can to believe she's safe and sound."

"I would do the same." Stoick said.

"Well, I've got loads to do. Good luck with finding her." Gobber said as he trailed off, the wagon rolling behind him, the metal inside clinking and clanking.

Stoick watched Gobber pull the wagon to the supposedly empty smithy. Sighing and shaking his head, he turned away to help with the distraught guests. If there was someone, or something, in the smithy Gobber would find it.

Astrid stayed in the smithy, like Hiccup told her. After Stoick had nearly found her a few moments passed before a terrible rattling of metal clashed into the smithy. She jumped to the floor to hid herself when she heard Gobber's humming. She sighed, and sat back on the cot.

Hours passed, and all Astrid had to do was listen to Gobber. He hummed, threw in a verse or two here and there, and worked. He hammered, hummed, hammered, and then she heard the plush and sizzle of a hot blade dropping into the water. She moved around, sat on the cot, laid on the cot, paced back and forth to keep herself from going stiff. She needed to get out of here and do something.

Gobber hammered away and she paced. Back and forth, back and forth, to the shelves, to the door, back to the shelves. The cot was on her right, and then her left, and then it was back on her right. This space was so tiny, she needed to go outside and doâ€|anything! Run, jump, roll around in the grass, ride a dragon around the island a few times.

Thinking of dragons, she thought of Stormfly. She couldn't ride her own dragon because she was Thor knows where. Would she ever come back? She could only hope so.

Astrid was near about to rip her hair out from boredom. She could always disguise herself, put ash in her hair, or coal, and wear a helmet or hat, wear something baggy and big to hid herself.

But that was all fanciful thinking. A stranger would cause a ruckus too. Stupid superstitious Vikings! Astrid sat back down on the cot. She brought her legs up with her, crossing them and her arms in one motion. She just couldn't sit still. She tapped her toes on the cot, adjusted her shoulders, scooted this way a bit and then back.

Gobber tossed something into the water and it hissed. In the momentary pause Astrid heard a scratching from underneath the cot. On the floor, like tiny claws attached to a tiny dragon, its thin nails rattling in their roots as they slid across the worn stone, brittle and breaking. Was there something under there?

Cautiously, Astrid pushed herself to her hands and knees but remained on the cot. Whatever it was, it didn't sound friendly. She dropped her head over the edge. The floor under the cot was empty. Knowing she had heard something Astrid got up, and knelt down on the floor beside the cot. There was something under there, she knew it.

But the floor was unoccupied, whole and unscratched. Gobber was hammering again, clank, clank, clank. But that sound had been so real, and terrible, had she imagined it? Or maybe it had come from outside and it only sounded like it was inside. Yes, that had to be it.

Whatever, Astrid sighed as she plopped back down on the cot.

Silence. The humming and hammering had stopped, no hissing followed. Astrid felt her heart drop into her stomach. Instantly, she threw herself to the floor and crawled under the cot, regardless of what might be there. She felt the wall of the closer pressing against her

back.

She could hear the step, plop, step of Gobber's walk heading to the closet's door. Right up to it, and he stopped. His shadow was moving under the crack between the door's uneven edge and the dusty floor. Astrid held her breath. The door opened, and she could see his boot and wooden leg.

He stepped inside, step, plop. Her heart was racing, the need to breath overpowering her will to not make a sound. Gobber stepped in the same pace-track she had, pausing here and there.

Was he sniffing the air? Did she smell?

Gobber turned and took a step to the door. He mumbled, "Guess I'm losing it."

Astrid let out a slow and quiet exhale. She couldn't hold her breath any longer. She drew it back in as Gobber took another step to the door. Astrid was sure she'd survived another close find.

She exhaled, just as Gobber turned back around and bent with quickness she didn't think he had. His face appeared so fast Astrid let out a startled scream.

"What in Thor's name are you doing under there?" Gobber asked, a bit edgy. "Stoick's got the entire village out scouring the island for you!"

Astrid didn't move.

"Get out from there." Gobber demanded. Astrid did as she was told, although she was intimidated by what could happen. Gobber held out his hand to help her stand. "Ought to string you up for making such a fuss. Why would youâ€¦"

Astrid saw the surprise in his face, the uncertainty, the confusion, disbelief, fear. He ripped his hand from hers and held it tight to his chest. There was a slight shake in his head, and he mouthed a few words before he found his voice again.

"Odin's beard." He whispered. He was searching her face. "I thought â€¦I thought you were Esol."

"I know." Astrid said. Right now, she almost wished she was.

"I don't understand." Gobber said. "Youâ€¦you're dead. Watched Stoick carry you're carcass to the tombs."

What to doâ€¦what to do? Astrid stand there, staring back at Gobber's blunt disbelief.

"You're dead." Gobber repeated. He gulped. "Why aren't you dead?"

"It's kind of a long story." Astrid shrugged. If there was any time for Hiccup to come back, now was it. She paused, expectantly, but he didn't miraculously appear in the door. She was on her own.

Astrid told Gobber everything. About waking up in the cave in

Hiccup's arms, and how he'd done some sort of ritual to bring her back. She told him everything she could about the cave, the stone basin, the altar. It all flooded out of her, relief of having something happening, something to think about, someone to talk to, hope that she wouldn't be stoned and cast out into the sea in fear.

And he listened. He didn't interrupt or comment, only listened. He sat on the cot while she paced back and forth, spilling things as they came to her. Finally she came to when he found her, and at last she gave a great sigh of relief.

"Soâ€¦you were dead, but now you're not?" Gobber asked, trying to wrap his brain around it.

"Yes." Astrid nodded.

"Alright." Gobber said. "I supposed weirder things have happenedâ€¦no, actually I don't think any have. But, tell me, _Astrid_, how did Hiccup know this ritual?"

"He didn't." Astrid said. "There was this woman, she told him. I think."

"A woman?" Gobber asked, suddenly his doubt and disbelief turned to suspicious, something sinister under his tone. "What did she look like?"

"Iâ€¦don't know. I didn't get a good look at her." Astrid said.

"Was she older? Dark skin, dark wild looking hair?" Gobber asked, leaning off the cot with every word. "Foreign, creepy, with eyes that bore into your soul?"

"That could be her." Astrid said. The description fit.

"Oh, dear." Gobber said, leaning back and rubbing his head with his hammer-hand.

"What?" Astrid said. "Do you know her?"

"Unfortunately, I think I do." Gobber sighed. "If it's the same woman I remember. It was years ago, when I was just a little lad, too young to swing an axe. Stoick's granddad was chief then, and like Stoick he took no nonsense. Gothi traveled more when she was a younger woman, and she had a strange friend who'd spent time on Berk. She was about as strange as they come, and they said she was only half human. The other half was darkness. She played with dark spirits, talked to demons, and knew things that people aren't supposed to know."

"What happened to her?" Astrid asked when Gobber paused.

"She was banished. I can't remember for what, exactly. Something the chief didn't approve of. She was bad news, they said. And if she is involved then your story almost makes sense. It sounds like something that creature would know." Gobber said.

The way he said 'creature' sounded so hateful. Astrid didn't have much feeling toward the woman. She had such a short time in her presence. However, she had aided in bringing her back from the dead,

and Astrid still didn't know how she felt about that.

"I would keep this to yourself." Gobber said, his voice a warning. "Stoick will not want to hear about that woman messing in mortal affairs with her devilment."

"Hiccup is afraid of telling him." Astrid said.

"I would be too." Gobber said. "I don't know how he'll react. Glad that you're back for Hiccup's sake, but Thor knows he'll be angry that that woman's weirdness was involved."

Astrid sighed.

"Don't worry." Gobber said in his cheerful tone. "I'm sure when this thing with Esol blows over Stoick will be less agitated. Speaking of which, do you know what happened to her?"

Without thinking about it, Astrid told him. "She ran away."

Gobber inhaled, preparing to speak, but then let it go.

"She was in love and her father disapproved of him, and so she and him planned to run away to be together. She borrowed a dragon and left." Astrid said, knowing that since she'd already spilled it she might as well give him a more specific answer.

"Oh." Gobber said. "Well that's alright, I guess. Better than dead and floating in the ocean, or eaten by a wild dragon."

Astrid laughed, it was such a morbid image.

"Have you eaten?" Gobber asked. "I'll bring back something from lunch for you."

"That would be great." Astrid said.

Gobber went back to work, hammering and humming. Astrid retreated to the closet, occasionally answering a question from Gobber. He'd never talked to anyone who'd been dead.

What was it like?

She couldn't really remember. Dark, like being underwater without the water. Kind of like being asleep, or half-asleep, or in that moment right after you wake up where you are still mostly asleep but just a little awake; just awake enough to know to be aware that you're sleeping.

Did she talk to anyone on the other side?

She didn't remember doing so. If she met anyone else it was too dreamlike to remember.

How did it work?

The ritual? She didn't know. She woke up in a tub of freezing water, and she remembered that she thought at first she was drowning. Hiccup pulled her out of the water. It looked as though it had been carved out of the rock.

Was she wearing that?

No, she was actually naked. Did that matter? Was it the idea of Hiccup seeing her naked that he found so interesting?

Gobber laughed at her then. He looked around, to make sure that no one saw him laughing to himself.

High over the forests on the west side of the island, Hiccup and Toothless were pretending to search. He drifted in and out of thought, thinking about Astrid back at the smithy, and about Esol wherever she was. Down below he saw a group searching in a stream, as if her body had washed away and somehow lodged between the rocks.

He felt horrible about putting everyone through such a rough day. And he saw Scaggs when he circled over the village. He looked horrible. He was a father who had no idea where his daughter was. He was no doubt thinking of the worst, of dead, of near death, of horrible painful death, of a future with no daughter or grandchild.

Hiccup knew his own father would be the same if he vanished. But he knew that Stoick wouldn't fall apart so easily. When Astrid had died her father was beside himself, which made Hiccup wonder if it was a daughter-father thing. If so, he hoped that he would have a son.

Hiccup shook his head with a agitated sigh. Toothless grunted.

"It's alright bud." Hiccup said. He'd landed on the idea of having children, which was more than Hiccup wanted to think about. Sure, one day, but that one day was a day far away.

And there's chapter seven! Whoo! Oden is actually spelt Odin, which I learned today. I would go back and fix it butâ€¦I really don't want to. Maybe one day, far away.

8. Chapter 8

And here we are already on chapter eight. Man, I feels like just yesterday I was posting the first chapter with tentative fingers, unsure if I really wanted to or not. I'm glad I did - if this little story makes a single person happy then I've done my duty as a writer.

Enjoy!

Chapter 8: Something Wicked

Why hadn't he told her to leave a note? Hiccup wondered as he landed on a cliff to rest Toothless and to stretch his legs. A note would have made everything so much simpler. He could forge one, but her father might recognize that it wasn't her writing. Hiccup grumbled and laid down on the grassy incline. He wanted to do something but he didn't know what.

The breeze was nice, calming. Toothless stretched out beside his rider, rolled over and on his back and stretched out like a common house cat. Hiccup dozed, the clouds overhead slowly passing,

changing, rearranging.

How strange dreams can be; twisted blurs of reality in unimaginable fantasies, filling the dreamer with hope, happiness, yearning to linger in the dream world as long as time allows; churning rational fears into charred mountains, peaks and bluffs are thrusting gapping monster jaws yearning to devour the trapped.

Hiccup twitched in his sleep. His hands grasping for the intangible, muscles fighting against invisible threats. Toothless stirred, his yellow eyes peering over at his rider from this upside-down position in the grass.

Hiccup was standing in an amber colored Berk, a sunset without a blaring sun, the skies dissolving into the ground. Hiccup felt like a cloud, weightless and drifting about. He saw the others standing about, vaporizing out of no where, their colors evolving out of the color-swirl. The twins, Snotlout, Fishlegs, Astrid, they were all there, silent, but mobile. Their dragons were circling above, wings still but their motionless bodies revolving as if by string, dangling above a babe's cradle.

The ground began to shake. Houses began to tremble, and slowly crumble into pieces from their roofs downward. The ground dissolved, opening up underfoot. And one by one they began to fall through. Ruffnut went first, her vanishing not bothering her or her brother, who soon followed. Snotlout fell, and then Fishlegs. Hiccup stood rooted where to stood. He couldn't move, couldn't help them, couldn't even speak.

The ground beneath Astrid crumbled and her footing was shaken. Her pale hand reached out to him, her face turning desperate as she began to fall. Hiccup fought his immobility. He tried to call out to her but he made no sound. His hand caught hers, fighting to get to her like he was fighting thick water. Together they struggled to pull her back to the crumbling ground. Something was pulling her down, holding tight to her. Hiccup won in the tug-of-war, and pulled Astrid back to where the ground was still ground.

A short reprieve. Astrid looked at him and he looked back, as the sky darkened and the black lightning struck. It flashed so horrible all around, crushing everything that still was. Hiccup and Astrid were all that was left.

Lightening-daggers came from the sky so quick that before they were noticed they were gone, back into oblivion. Astrid gripped his shirt, a terror on her face, a hole through her chest - the darkness swirled on the other side. Her blue eyes faded. She was dead in his arms.

Hiccup was thrown awake by a snort from Toothless. The dragon was crouched beside him, his great eyes were starting at him with intensity. Hiccup sat up, aware now that it had all been a dream. He patted the dragon on the nose.

"It's alright bud." Hiccup said. The breathlessness in his voice took him back. "It was just a dream."

Hiccup stood and shook off the horrible feeling he'd been left with. The dream was so real, it lingered, tingles in his arms, restlessness

in his legs, a pounding in his chest, and a yearning to hold Astrid and now that she was alive, to hear her breathing. The dream-sights were swirling around behind his eyes; the others vanishing through the ground, the fear he felt, the terror on Astrid's face, the death-blow from the sky, the heart-tearing wound that drained her life.

"Let's get back up there." Hiccup said to Toothless. They'd taken their break and if he slacked off from the search too much his father would notice, even if he didn't see. It was strange how he knew things like that, a special sense he was given when he became chief. And it was that sense that had Hiccup paranoid about Astrid. He had the feeling that his father already knew.

Astrid was in the smithy, like Hiccup had instructed, only she'd left the closer behind. Gobber invited her to test out the weapon he'd been repairing for Scaggs and his men before he departed. He worked away while she stood beside the forge and out of the way.

She swung swords through the air, hearing the swish of the blade on nothing, feeling the weight of it in her arms, the use of her muscles. It was like she hadn't moved in so long, which she supposed she hadn't. She'd thought about it before, and it was still strange to think that she had been dead, and now wasn't anymore.

Were these muscles the same she'd had before she died? Or were they wasted away and these made new? If so, this entire body wasn't hers but a new one made identical to the other. Which meant that it wasn't really hers. But it felt the same, and looked the same.

She heard someone talking, and paused. "Who's that?"

"What?" Gobber asked, not pausing in his work.

"Someone was talking." Astrid said.

"I didn't hear anything." Gobber said. He glanced outside. "Ah, look at the time. It's midday meal time, and I'm starving. I'll sneak you back something, lass."

Astrid waves as he left. Maybe she'd just been hearing things, again.

She hadn't wanted Gobber to find her when he came to the forge but now she was glad that he had. Gobber was on her side, loyal and kind hearted to the end. She replaced the sword on the table beside the forge and retreated to Hiccup's closet workspace. Gobber had been a lookout, and announced a 'hello' if someone was approaching that might see her.

Astrid gripped the door's handle when she heard someone talking. She paused, and listened. It wasn't a voice she knew. It was coming from inside the smithy, not outside in the village. She looked around but didn't see anyone. It was the same voice she'd heard moments ago.

"Hello?" Astrid asked to no one. And no one answered.

But she could hear them, talking as if to someone else. It was coming from the other side of the smithy, the supply cupboard, storage. Was

someone in there? Why?

Astrid grabbed the sword she'd been swinging. She felt a little threatened by this voice. It didn't belong there. She hadn't seen anyone come in. She made her way cautiously through the smithy to the supply closet. She steadies herself to jump whoever it is, and inhaled, and jumped around the corner to surprise them.

The supply cupboard was empty. Only broken swords, dented maces, damages shields, chunks of iron and ore. Astrid looked around. There wasn't anyone to make those voices. No one.

Her heard it again, behind her, she turned quickly but the forge was empty. The voice was dancing around her, without a source. She straightening up and gathered herself. She was hearing things, maybe Vikings were talking nearby, or a dragon was sleeping and making dreaming sounds. Yes, of course, that was it.

Astrid dropped her sword arm and lifted her foot to walk back to Hiccup's workspace when she heard it. A scraping on the ground. Astrid turned back to the supply closet, nothing changed. It came again, the scraping, and this time she saw a slight movement of light between two barrels holding up a board on which shields were staked to the ceiling.

She stepped to look between them. In the small space was a terrible looking child. Its skin blue-white and bruised, wrapped tight around protruding bones, dark hair matted and wet on its head, empty black eyes bulging from blackened eye sockets glared upward at her with a chilling stare. Astrid makes so sound. The child looks at her with those horrible eyesâ€|Astrid wished it would look away.

A sound behind her, and Astrid jerked her attention to it. There was nothing but an empty smithy. Swallowing hard, she pressed her attention back to the child. The space between the barrels was empty.

"What?" Astrid gasped to herself. The child was gone from the supply closet. She was grasping her sword to her chest, her hands shaking. She steadied herself and tried to loosen her arms. She was tense, and it wasn't easier shaken out.

She was seeing things. It was a lack of hunger. She was going stir-crazy. Yes, that was it. Astrid told herself these things. She should go back to the closet before someone that wasn't Gobber or Hiccup walked by. She turned but was rudely halted by the sudden and silent appearance of the child.

Standing in the doorway to the supply closet, the child was staring at her with those same eyes. Startled, Astrid stumbled backwards. The sword clanked beside her. The child's mouth opened, a horrible darkness on its gums. The sound that it emitted was horrible, a death-sound. In reflex Astrid picked the sword from the floor and swung it at the child. At the moment she knew it would impact its head she shut her eyes.

She didn't want to see what would come out of the child, but she had a feeling it wouldn't be blood. Through closed eyes she felt the impact, but it was thicker and harder than she expected. Astrid waited a moment before opening her eyes.

The sword had hit and lodged itself into the wooden side of the doorway. The child was gone, the sound stopped. Astrid felt the shakes in her hands spread into her arms and to the rest of her. She stood and pulled the sword from the wood. She couldn't catch her breath.

There was a cheerful whistling heading toward the smithy. Astrid ducked back inside the supply closer to hid herself from passerby.

"I brought lunch. It's not much but its all I could get away with as a snack. Those women are scrupulous about where their food goes." Gobber said. He continued his whistle.

Astrid sighed. She stepped out to a simple meal of bread and water. To her empty stomach it was a gracious relief. She replaced the sword with the others and took the meal into the closet, sitting on the cot with trembling hands. Gobber continued his whistling, sometimes singing, hammering away at his work.

The search came to an end as the sun began to fall. The Vikings marched to the Great Hall, defeat heavy among them. Stoick looked at his people, and the mirrored defeat in Scaggs. He hadn't eaten that day, refusing to until he saw his daughter safe and sound, or at least knew she was dead.

He'd said it was not knowing that was killing him. Should he ask Thor to bring her one or that she should find her way to the other side?

Hiccup sat with them. Stoick kept pushing off talking to him. He knew he'd have to but told himself that it could wait. Hiccup looked defeated as well, only his was different, a guilty defeat. He wanted to question his own son without Scaggs hearing his answers.

That night the evening meal was subdued. Trader Johan slipped through the doors, and found his way to the chief's table.

"Johan?" Stoick asked. "I thought you'd be off by now."

"I was, only I came back." Trader Johan said, guilt ridden and staring at the floor.

"Why? Did something happen?" Stoick said, preparing to stand.

"Eh, well, not 'happen' but 'happened'." Trader Johan said.

"What?" Stoick said, his voice like thunder.

"Well, yesterday before I was to shove off little Esol came to me with a letter." Trader Johan said.

Hiccup nearly choked, coughing the water back into the cup. No one seemed to notice. He wanted to get Johan's attention but couldn't risk it.

"A letter from my girl?" Scaggs said. "Why didn't you say something earlier?"

Johan seemed to flinch as Scaggs thrust his fist to the table.

"I am sorry, but little Esol made me promise to wait a day." Trader Johan said. "I'd nearly forgotten, and when I remembered I came straight back here."

He withdrew a letter, holding out to Scaggs.

"She told you to give it to me?" Scaggs asked.

"That she did, master Scaggs, sir." Johan said. His foot was tapping quickly.

"What does it say?" Scaggs ripped it open.

"I know not, sir." Johan shook his head.

Scaggs read silently. The entire Great Hall was watching now. Hiccup sat as still as he could. He could be exposed within the next few moments. As of that moment there was no way to escape the horde that would descend. The door was on the other side, through too many watching and waiting Vikings.

Scaggs made a unmanly gagging sound, and slammed his fist on to the table. The letter was clenched in his other, his grip wrinkling the heavy parchment.

"Well, what does it say?" Stoick asked.

"She had gone." Scaggs said. There was a murmuring sound through the hall. "She won't say where, only why."

He threw the paper down. Hiccup jumped from his seat to lean over his father's arm as they both read the letter.

Father, I know by now you've realized that I'm gone. Don't worry, I am safe and sound. I have gone but I won't tell you where. I'm not coming back to Berk, and I may never come home. I love you, but I have to do this. Mother always told me that love was important, and someone else once told me that if I loved something that I should fight to keep it. I am fighting to keep something I love. I love you, and goodbye, Esol.

Hiccup breathed a welcomed sigh of relief. He caught his father's eye and took a step to the side. Hiccup was sure that his father knew that his son knew more of the story. He'd be asked about it later, no doubt. But as of right now there was nothing in the letter about him, dragons, or her destination. It was just vague enough to work.

It was a great weight off his shoulders. Everyone knew she had gone, and that she was safe, and that she wasn't lost on the island waiting to be helped.

"Then we must prepare for departure." Scaggs said, regaining his composure. "If my daughter has left me, discarded her family, even for something she loves, I must return and inform the village. If she had discarded me, I must discard her in return. I must return home and mourn her properly."

Mourn? Hiccup felt that was a bit extreme. But Esol had said he held

high standards. She'd had to run away to be with someone she loved, against her father's wishes and will. The visiting Vikings murmured in agreement, a bit sorrowful.

"Well, the tomorrow we will send you off properly." Stoick said. He wasn't going to argue. He looked sideways at his son, and Hiccup caught his glare. As soon as those ships were out of their docks, it said, they were going to have a chat.

At least it was one problem down, Hiccup thought. He averted his eyes from his father. The rest of the dinner went by slowly and sadly. To the visiting Vikings, Esol's letter announced her death. No one from Berk wanted to argue this logic, so they mourned with them.

It was one problem down, and one to go. Hiccup sighed into his stew. The next wouldn't be solved so easily. Tonight they would have to talk about how best to go about it. As the eating and drink wound down, Hiccup managed to escape. He ran down the Great Hall steps and to the smithy.

Gobber had been working, there were newly mended swords and shields everywhere. A drop hit Hiccup's stomach. Had Astrid been forced into hiding all day? By Thor, she probably hadn't eaten or drank, and here Hiccup had been flying about, taking his time at the Great Hall.

"Astrid?" Hiccup whispered as he opened his workspace's door. She was inside, looking through one of his design books. At his appearance, she smiled widely, forgetting all about the book.

"Hiccup!" Astrid said, gratefully. She ran at him and tossed her arms around his neck.

Suddenly, Hiccup remember his dream that afternoon. He tightened his arms around her, feeling the rise and fall of her chest between his arms and his own chest. She was warm, breathing, her heart beating.

"I'm sorry I left you in here all day. My dad was watching me like a starving dragon watching a fishing boat." Hiccup said.

"It's alright." Astrid said.

"Are you hungry? Need anything?" Hiccup said.

"No, no, Gobber brought food not too long ago." Astrid gestured to the remains on the small table, a few thin fish bones and bread crumbs.

"Gobber?" Hiccup asked. He felt a panic starting. "He knows?"

"Yes, but it's alright." Astrid said.

"But, if he knows he'll tell my dad and then my dad will know and then-

"Hiccup, it's fine." Astrid said, stopping his rant with a finger to his lips. "He promised to keep it a secret, even from Stoick."

Hiccup was not reassured. Stoick and Gobber were friends, good friends. They told each other important things. He shook his head. His second problem was coming at him faster than he wanted it to.

"But, come in, we need to talk about something." Astrid said, pull him in and shutting the door.

"What?" Hiccup asked, letting her push him down to the cot.

"It's about the woman, from the cave, the one who knew the ritual." Astrid said. She sat down beside him.

"What about her?" Hiccup asked.

"Well, what do you know about her?"

"Nothing." Hiccup shrugged. He didn't, now that he thought about it. "She's a friend of Gothi's. Why?"

Astrid told him everything that Gobber told her earlier that day; about the strange woman who fit the description, how she was rumored to be evil and dangerous, and how she was banished for doing something that Gobber didn't remember.

"It must have been awful to be banished over." Hiccup said. He thought of the few people who had been banished in the history of Berk. They were all traitors, murderers, treacherous and dangerous. That woman he met didn't fit into any of those categories.

"I know. But what is she did something like this before?" Astrid said. Fear was playing in her eyes. "It was over something dark, mysterious, something the Vikings at the time didn't understand. They feared it. They didn't understand and so they labeled her as a evil woman, to be thrown out of decent society."

"But you are not her, Astrid." Hiccup said. He knew the fear in her eyes. She was afraid of being feared enough that they wanted her dead.

"What if they assume that I'm connected to her, and they throw me out and hunt me down with torches and readied daggers, calling to sacrifice me to the god of their choosing to cleanse the village of the evil and feared woman's taint?" Astrid said in one breathe.

"You've given this some thought?" Hiccup said.

"I've had a lot of time today." Astrid said.

Hiccup laughed, but Astrid did not. She returned a smile and a shrug. She wouldn't be getting over those feeling for a while. They washed their faces in the lukewarm water of the forge and shut themselves in the workspace closet. Hiccup blew out the candle and they were in a black darkness. He felt his way back to the cot, pulled onto it by Astrid. He collapsed into her arms and rolled around to sleep beside her. They fit together, once they arranged themselves, and it often took them a few minutes to get it just right. Her head nestled in his neck, their arms and legs tangled in each other.

Hiccup heard Astrid open her mouth several times, but she closed it. She wanted to say something but she changed her mind each time she tried.

"Something bothering you?" Hiccup asked.

"I justâ€¦" Astrid sighed.

"What?" Hiccup asked.

"I just thought I saw something today." Astrid said. "It's been bugging me."

"What was it?" Hiccup asked through a yawn.

"I don't know." Astrid said. "It was weird, I thought I heard talking but Gobber didn't hear anything. And then I thought I saw something, but then it was gone."

"Tricks of the light, maybe?" Hiccup suggested. A shadow used to pass over his bedroom wall, every night, and it frightened in terrible until he discovered that it was the night watch passing by with a torch, the light casting a shadow. "And people were all over the island today, it could have been a voice carried by the wind."

"I suppose." Astrid said. She didn't sound convinced. But if not that, what could it have been?

"Goodnight." Hiccup said into her hair.

"Goodnight." Astrid said, but Hiccup was already asleep.

BOOM - I rolled out two chapters in one night. That's impressive, for me anyway. I've done it before but it's not a regular thing. It usually happens on nights when I've got to get up in the morning but somehow my brain just keeps working - like it knows I should go to sleep but it doesn't want to. I do actually have to get up for school in the morningâ€¦so it makes sense. Thanks, brain. I appreciate it. Kind ofâ€¦I have mixed feelings.

I wrote another fanfic, a while ago - it's basically Dagur kidnaps Astrid to get revenge on Hiccup. It's graphic, a little rape-y, but it has no ending. And I don't know what to do with it, whether to share or keep it to myself until I no longer care and then cast it into the oblivious of the virtual recycling bin. Thoughts?

I might have a slight Astrid obsession. Just a little one.

Oh - I figured out why I'm on hyper-writer tonight - I had a glass of wine after dinner. That explains a lot. Weird how drinking and writer go hand in handâ€¦like Fitzgerald, Hemmingway, and Burowski - they were all alcoholics. Wrote as alcoholics, played as alcoholics, and died as alcoholics. But they live on as legends. I want to be one of those people - only I want to live forever, like Ozzy Osborne and confound the laws of science with by defying of age and brain cells - like Betty White. I want to be the next Betty White, but of literature.

Wow, holy cow I need to stop.

9. Chapter 9: Unexpected Trials

I am soooooooo sorry it's been this long! My computer finally let me on today and I was like - UPDATE! I've got a few chapters done and I'm uploading them all so if my computer does this thing again where it refuses to acknowledge that is a legit place then I'll be ready.

I wrote this in the emotional aftermath of the trailer. I was so full of emotion that it took a bit longer to get through.

Chapter 9: Unexpected Trials of a Father

The seas were calm and welcoming as Scaggs and his men prepared for their departure. The poor man hadn't slept a wink in the night. Several times he had gotten up to pace. Stoick felt horrible for him but knew there wasn't anything he could do, short of sending a dragon riding army to search for the girl. He didn't suggest it because he knew it was a waste of time and energy. She had too much time, and there were too many directions she could have gone.

They started before dawn to ready the ships. There were less men than normal at the docks, which Stoick attributes to the early hour. The sun was barely pushing above the water.

"Stoick, will our weapons be ready?" one of Scaggs's men asked.

"I'll find out." Stoick said. He started back up toward the village.

Gobber'd had a wagon full but he'd also had the entire day before to work. He was an excellent smith, and no doubt was faster than anyone else on the island. At least a positive outcome was that his son could return to his own house.

The smithy was still dark as Stoick came into the village. He made for it, but his name called in a rush stopped him.

"Stoick?" It was Gobber, wiping the sleep from his face with his good hand, looked blustered and a bit shocked to see him. He hobbled quickly to stand between Stoick and the smithy. He couldn't move very fast on that peg leg but it didn't stop him.

"Ah, Gobber, are the weapons ready?" Stoick asked. "The men are asking for them. They want to leave as soon as possible."

"Aye, they are. Finished them all last night. Pulled a late one, I'll have to charge extra for that." Gobber jokes. Of course, these were all on the house after Esol's vanishing act under their noses.

Gobber hobbled into the darkened smithy, to the wagon that had been re-loaded with the refurbished and sharpened weapons.

Was Stoick overanalyzing, or did Gobber stop him from getting to close to the smithy? Why? Was there something he wasn't supposed to see? He then added Hiccup's lie from the day before, about the

nonexistent eyeglass in the smithy. Once meant nothing. But twice? It was too much of a coincidence.

Gobber made one last check that all the weapons were ready, rather quickly, and ushered the wagon back outside. While he did so Stoick eyed the darkness in the smithy. Nothing seemed out of place. Hiccup's little workroom was closed off.

"These are better than before." Gobber said, a distraction in his voice. He was acting strangely.

"Hiccup should be there too see them off." Stoick said, taking a few steps toward Hiccup's work room.

"Oh, ahâ€¦don't worry about him, Stoick, I'll make sure Hiccup gets there." Gobber said, louder than he needed to, as he hobble-jogged to halt Stoick from waking Hiccup. "Heâ€¦had a late night, helping me out. He's the only reason I got it all done, really. Ten more minutes for the boy?"

Stoick eyed Gobber carefully. He was hiding something. Hiccup was hiding something. He wanted to know what. But Gobber was sincere. He'd never lied to Stoick before unless it was for his own good.

"Fine. Makes sure he gets there." Stoick said, giving the work room door one last look.

Stoick went back to the docks with his hands in fists. He didn't like it when people hid things from him. It meant they didn't want him to know, which meant they knew he would be angry, which meant they weren't supposed to be doing whatever it was they were doing, and they knew it.

The ships were ready within a few hours. The supplies were stocked: food, water, and weapons. Hiccup had meandered down to the docks with Gobber looking like he'd slept well in those ten extra minutes. Stoick made sure to pull him from the crowd as the ships shoved off. He clamped a hand on his son's shoulder to ensure that he wouldn't fly off.

The whole village turned out to wave goodbye as the ships sailed away. Stoick waved and Hiccup followed his chiefly gestures. The smaller the ships became the fewer the Vikings that stayed on the docks. One by one, sometimes by a few more, everyone went back to the village for their daily duties.

Hiccup tried to escape a few times, too. But Stoick held tight to his shoulder, keeping his son in his place until the ships were but tiny transparent dots on the horizon.

"He was really upset." Hiccup said, finally giving in on what could not be avoided.

>"How could he not be?" Stoick asked. "Esol was a lovely girl, kindhearted, loving, and sweet. Everyone that met her loved her. It would be a crime not to feel heartbroken at her loss."<p>

"Well, her letter said she was alright. You make it sound like she's dead." Hiccup said.

"To her father she might as well be." Stoick said. He needed to steer this conversation, but subtly wasn't his strong suit. Never was, and that didn't bother him. "Son, there was some mighty strange weather the night before last. Did you see it?"

Hiccup sighed as he thought back, two nights ago—the subtle change in expression was enough to alert Stoick. He had. Hiccup paused with words in his mouth.

"No, I must have missed it." Hiccup asked. "What kind of strange weather? Thor-shaped clouds? Blood rain?"

"There is something happening on Berk, son." Stoick said, ignoring his smart mouth. He kept his hand tight on his shoulder. Hiccup's face was guilty. "I know everything that goes on here. And I know that you know more than you're telling me."

"I assure you that everything in Esol's letter was true." Hiccup said, picking his words carefully. He was avoiding his father's eyes.

"How could she have trained a dragon so quickly?" Stoick asked.

"Ah, well, it was—" Hiccup started but trailed off.

"Where has that Deadly Nadder gone to?" Stoick asked. "Astrid's dragon simply vanished, too, did it?"

"Ah, well—"

"You helped her son, I know. She took that dragon and she's gone." Stoick said.

"Then what else do you need to know?" Hiccup said, quickly to insert his voice.

"You've been spending a lot more time in the smithy, days. You won't look me in the eye, and neither will Gobber. What's in the smithy, son?" Stoick demanded.

"Ah, nothing that shouldn't be." Hiccup said. He darted around it fast.

"Hiccup." Stoick said sharply. A warning tone.

"I promise, there isn't anything in the smithy that shouldn't be. Everything's fine." Hiccup said. But Stoick could smell the aversion on those words. "Trust me, Dad, everything's under control."

Under control. Those words were avoiding words. There had to be something going on in order for that something to be under control. Stoick narrowed his eyes at his son as he wormed his way from his grasp. He headed toward the village. No doubt to the smithy.

Hiccup made it back to the smithy but he was out of breath. Gobber was hammering away on iron, singing about sailing. He nodded toward Hiccup as he slid inside and toward his work space. He opened the door quickly and shut it just as fast.

"What's happening?" Astrid asked, standing from her seat on the cot.

Her blue eyes were wide and searching him for information.

"My dad is getting suspicious. He knows there something here that I'm keeping from him. And sooner or later he'll force his way in, no matter what me or Gobber say." Hiccup said, pacing and holding his head in his hands, messing absently with his hair.

"What can we do?" Astrid shrugged.

"I don't know." Hiccup rubbed his face, sighing between his fingers.

"Let's go for a ride today." Astrid said. She clutched on his arm, pulling his hand away from his face. She twisted her hand in his. "I really need to get out of this tiny space. It's driving me insane."

Hiccup sighed, thinking it over. They couldâ€¦ if they could get out of here without anyone noticing. "I could bring Toothless around back, and we can cover your head, and no one will notice."

"Yes!" Astrid said, smiling wide at him, the prospect of leaving exciting.

Hiccup left the smithy and headed straight for the stables. In the short time it would take him to get there and back with Toothless his dad might barge in. Toothless was glad to see him and even more so when he put the saddle on him.

"To the smithy, Toothless." Hiccup instructed him. Toothless took turns gliding and hopping back down to the smithy. Around back, Hiccup lifted himself from the saddle to climb down but a hooded someone met him before he could.

Astrid had thrown a cloak over her head and shoulders. Hiccup sat back down as she climbed onto the saddle tightening her arms around his waist and pressing herself against his back.

"Let's go!" Astrid said in his ear.

Her hot breath filled his ear with the same excitement it was spoken with. She gripped the front of his shirt and he gave Toothless the nudge that meant to rise. Toothless gave a little dragon roar and pushed off the ground with the legendary ferocity Night Furies are known for.

High above Berk Astrid pulled the cloak off her head. She nestled her chin on his shoulders as the wispy clouds soared passed them. They were in another world, one made of rainbow colored pillars of clouds. They stretched up like the great archways and columns of a godly mansion, fit for Odin. It was a garden reserved for gods.

Astrid tucked herself as close to him as she could. Hiccup wanted to stay up here as long as possible. The day was still early; most of it was left to enjoy this paradise. The sun would fall eventually the sun would fall and this dream world would fade into the darkness of night. But until then they had this all to themselves.

The house felt empty with Scaggs and his men gone but Stoick wasn't complaining. He'd grown used to it being this quiet. With the

visiting Vikings gone the village retreated to its original routines. Vikings were making bread, tending to the animals, making small repairs, sweeping dirt and dust out of their doorways.

After Hiccup quick departure he'd gone back by the smithy. Gobber gave him no interruptions, no sidesteps, no interference. The back room where Hiccup worked was empty. There wasn't anything in there that shouldn't have been, like Hiccup had said. However, it still bothered him. The lack was bothering him. Hiccup had cleaned up after himself.

He'd left, and Gobber didn't say a word about it.

"Nah, I think he took Toothless up. Been gone since this morning." Gobber shrugged.

Stoick had occasionally scanned the sky. For what, he didn't know. Maybe the answer would come flying out of the clouds. He had returned home as the day dimmed, and expected his son to do the same. The guests were gone, his room was back to normal, there wasn't any reason for him not to come home.

But the sky darkened, the stars came out, the moon glowed, and his son did not come home. It was past sleeping hours and odds are he had returned to the smithy. Why?

Stoick rose from his chair by the fire. He would figure it out yet. He left his house and crept through the village heading toward the smithy. The village was silent with sleeping Vikings. The smithy was black, the forge's water still.

There was a mumbling, one he knew was his son's. So he did come back to the smithy—why? Wait, there was someone else. He was talking, and someone was talking back to him.

Stoick crept as slowly, as quietly, as he could to the workroom door.

"Leave it down, it looks fine." Hiccup was saying with the last breaths of a laugh

"It keeps getting in the way." said a girl. Stoick paused. He knew that voice. For a moment he was filled with joy that it was Esol, but that voice—it wasn't hers.

"What do you want me to do?" Hiccup laughed. "I can braid hair about as well as I swing an axe."

There was laughter. That voice—Stoick was picking his brain as best he could without making a sound. He knew it. But from where? And why in Thor's name would Hiccup be hiding a girl in the smithy?

"Get me a piece of leather, thinner the better. I'll do it but it'll look funny." she said.

"Then braid it the other way, on the side." Hiccup said.

A pause. "Maybe."

Shuffling. Hiccup was looking through something. "Here's one. Is it

long enough?"

"Yeah, that's good." she said. She was braiding hair, by the sounds.
"Yeah, the side might work better."

"It looks good." Hiccup said. "I like it."

She laughed, but it wasn't a humored laugh, more of one composed of the finer emotions.

"What? I do." Hiccup said. He sat on the cot. He said something else, too soft for Stoick to hear it through the door. She laughed again, softer too.

"Thank you, Hiccup, really." she said. Saying his name sounded so familiarâ€|

Stoick almost fell into the door, but caught himself. He did know that voice, but he hadn't expected it. She was dead, and he hadn't considered her as a possibility.

They weren't speaking anymore, and Stoick felt the need to sit. He backed away from the door, from the smithy, and walked in a daze back to the house. The fire was as bright and hot as it had been. He sat down in the chair beside it, staring blankly into its burning depths.

Astrid. That had been her voice. Stoick had no doubts. Hiccup had been keeping her in the smithy. Butâ€|how? It was impossible. He leaned back, rubbed his face. He hadn't been hearing things. He'd heard her speak.

The flames of the fire were hot on his face. They were bright, orange and yellow and white. Somewhere, in the translucence of the yellow streaks was an old memory he'd tried to put away. An option, a choice, given to him years ago, in the light of a not-fire with its too yellow flames.

Stoick leaned forward gripping the arms of his chair.

"Oh, no." Stoick whispered to the flames.

When they'd gotten back from their day-long flight, Hiccup and Astrid both wished the day would last just a few more hours. Toothless was tired, and headed off to the stables without his usual defeated groan.

Astrid's hair was a mess. She'd left it down since she'd came back. She sat on the cot running her fingers through it, pulling out the tangles before they knotted worse. Hiccup went to find a quick meal, which turned out to be slightly stale bread and fish he roasted over the forge's smoldering fire.

"Hiccup, help me braid this back." Astrid said, gesturing to her hair.

"What?" Hiccup asked.

"I can't braid it behind my head." She said, showing him that her hands didn't bend that way.

"Then how you'd get it back there before?"

"My aunt did it." Astrid pulled the twisted trunk of blonde hair behind her head.

Hiccup laughed. He felt exhausted to. "Leave it down, it looks fine."

"It keeps getting in the way." Astrid complained, throwing the mess over her head and letting it explode into a ocean of yellow waves around her face and shoulders.

"What do you want me to do?" Hiccup laughed at the sight. "I can braid hair about as well as I swing an axe."

Astrid laughed, because she's seen him try to swing her axe. He was good at many things but straight face-to-face fighting was not one of them. Hiccup laughed with her, a harmonious mesh. Astrid gathered her hair back, smoothing it out in her hands.

"Get me a strip of leather, thinner the better. I'll do it but it'll look funny." Astrid said.

"Then braid it the other way, on the side." Hiccup suggested. He motioned to the way she was holding it to the side of her neck. It looked nice.

Astrid stopped to consider. "Maybe."

Hiccup turned to his shelves. There should be a stray strip of leather in there somewhere. He looked in a few different places and at last found one. It was thin and flexible. "Here's one. Is it long enough?"

"Yeah, that's good." Astrid said, holding out her hand to take it from him. She laid it in her lap and started to braid her hair to the side. It was much easier on her hands. It worked better, not having it weight down the back of her head like it used to. "Yeah, the side might work better."

"It looks goods." Hiccup said. He'd never watched her braid it before. The quick and subtle movements of her hands, her elegant fingers. It was beautiful. "I like it."

Astrid blushed, and looked down to hid it from Hiccup. But he noticed, and she laughed it off. How could he pull such girly emotions out of her so easily? All he had to do was look at her with those green eyes, so bight, welcoming, loving.

"What? I do." Hiccup said, taking a seat beside her on the cot. With her hair pulled to one side the creamy skin of her neck was exposed. He slipped one arm around her waist. He said in her ear, "It's beautiful, just like you."

Astrid let out a blushing laugh, the hot breath in her ear, on her neck, like the pleasant licking of a fire.

"Thank you, Hiccup, really." Astrid said, leaning toward him. It wasn't very far between her lips and his. A kiss, and then a second,

and a third.

They tangled themselves, limbs twisted around limbs, enclosing around each other, eliminating any and all space between them. Each kiss left the need for another, each touch reaped the next. A hand across her hip bone made her shiver, a shiver's gasp escaping her lips and into Hiccup's mouth. He smiled as he kissed her, trying to entice that same sound from her again, but she was on alert. It became a fight for dominance, the winner getting to pin the other down. It lasted until eyelids could not stay open, muscles were too worn to move and hold.

There was a sound. It pried Astrid from her precarious place on the cot. She was laying half on top of Hiccup, her face nestled into his neck. His arms were around her, one of her legs twisted around one of his.

She looked around the little room. It was black from night, and she couldn't see anything. But she'd heard somethingâ€|it had woken her up. Hasn't she? Maybe it had been a dream.

"Come back."

A whisper. Astrid's wide eyes searched the darkness for its source. She had not dreamed that. It couldn't have been an animal or a sigh of the smithy. It had been words, clear, crisp words. In the few moments after she was beginning to doubt herself. Maybe it had been the smithy.

"Come home."

It was a voice, no doubt. It wasâ€|a child's voice. Astrid felt her skin tingle, the flesh prickling with bumps, her breath quickening. The child from earlier came to the forefront of her mind. It's cold face, dead eyes.

She heard something. Brittle nails sliding across the stone floor, dragging through the dust. She could almost feel the sound vibrating through the still air. It paused, and plopped. Astrid was gripping Hiccup's shirt. She could feel her hand shaking. Could Hiccup not hear anything?

It tumbled, underneath the cot. Somethingâ€|breathing. Rasping, empty, sordid breath sucking cool air into molded lungs. It was crawling out inch by inch on its scratching claws.

Hiccup stirred. A waking groan slipped from his lips. His hand came up and landed softly on hers.

"Astrid?" Hiccup asked, his voice tired. He began to come out of his sleep with a yawn. "Astrid, what's wrong?"

"Do you not hear that?" Astrid asked.

"Hear what?"

How could he not hear it? She could barely hear him over the horrible sound. He shifted, sitting up and finding her cheek with his palm.

"Are you alright?" Hiccup asked. She felt his breath on her mouth.

"No, Hiccup." Astrid said. "How can you not hear that? It's right underneath you!"

"What are you talking about?" Hiccup asked. He was awake now. He was sitting up, shifting her as he moved. She was sitting on his lap, hands still gripping his shirt. "Astrid?"

The sound was gone.

"Hiccup, I heard it, I did." Astrid pleaded. Was she losing it? She buried herself into Hiccup.

'I'm not saying you didn't.' Hiccup said. He hugged her tight. "I just didn't hear anything."

"I know." Astrid said. And neither had Gobber.

"Tell me about it." Hiccup insisted. "Everything."

Astrid sighed into his hair. She started to tell him about the sound she's just heard, and how it was the same that she'd heard the day before. Hiccup shifted them, and they were laying back on the cot. He'd slung one arm around her while she spoke and kept his drifting green eyes on her.

She told him how Gobber couldn't hear it either, and about the horrible looking child she found in the supply closet, and how it moved and vanished. She told him she'd hear a voice just then along with the sound.

"I don't know what it means." Astrid said, hearing the pathetic whine in her own voice. She hated it.

When no response came she turned to look at Hiccup. His green eyes were closed. A gentle snore accompanied his inhale. Astrid sighed. She tried to fall back asleep. She tumbled through horrible dream after horrible dream, each with a variation of surging claws and deathly children.

Stoick rose with the sun, breathing in the last of the cool night breezes. From his house he could see the corner of the smithy and knew what he must do. Clouds rolled over the sun and cast the village in shadow as he marched to the smithy.

He stood by the forge. Hiccup's workspace door was within sight. He would wait for him to wake up. Stoick inhaled deeply. He was dreading the conversation he couldn't avoid any longer. He stiffened as he heard movement on the other side of the door. He put on his fatherly face, stern but protective.

Yay! Chapter nine! After editing, I noticed I have a comma-thing. I deleted I don't know how many from this chapter alone. Stay tuned for the next installment! I'm uploading it now while the window is up so then all I've got to do is post it.

I realized that the other riders haven't made an appearance since the first chapter, but then after I thought about it I realized that there hasn't been a need for them yet. They haven't been needed to further the plot. So I tried to work them in to this chapter, I think I sort of failed though. They just made a kind of cameo.

Also, in this chapter I mention Astrid's family. They (dreamworks) never mention them so I have no idea, aside from an uncle that was killed at a young age. I stemmed from that tidbit.

Chapter 10: Taking a Day

Hiccup rose the next morning stifling a great yawn. Astrid was curled around him, his shirt clutched in her fists. He hugged her close in attempts to wake her gently. Her eyes fluttered open, lips spread into a sleepy smile, a soft murmur in response.

"What do you think about a flight? I know a great spot of a picnic." Hiccup said.

"Oh?" Astrid stretched her arms out over her head, yawning as she did so.

"Yeah, it's a nice grassy outpost, secluded, with white sand beaches and a waterfall that runs off the mountain. Clear, clean water." Hiccup said. "It's one of Toothless's favorites."

"He told you that, did he?" Astrid smiled.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, he did." Hiccup said. He could really get used to waking up like this every morning.

"It sounds amazing." Astrid rested her arms around his neck, draping them over his shoulders.

Hiccup felt that magnetic tug, and wasted no time to act on it. He leaned down and kissed her sleep-dried lips.

"I'll be back with Toothless." Hiccup said as he reluctantly pulled himself away from her. Getting off the cot, he noticed where her hands had clutched at his shirt. She'd left wrinkles from her grip. Had she been holding on to him all night?

He flexed his shoulders, ebbing out what tiredness remained. He could hear Astrid moving behind him as he left the door to his workspace open. Stretching, by the sounds. He felt elated to be spending another day with her, just the two of them. All that time without her and now all this time together. It was like a reward.

That elation quickly evaporated as Hiccup turned into the smithy. Stoick was standing just inside the smithy. His broad face was beaming at his son, one of those looks of mixed fatherly disappointment, chiefly disapproval, and stiff anger. Hiccup hadn't seen that face in a while, not since before the Red Death and the dragon's. Still, it incited a fear inside Hiccup that he hadn't missed.

"Heyâ€¦Dad." Hiccup said, trying to ease the tension. He felt it heavy on his chest, boring into his eyes and worming its way into

every part of him.

Stoick said nothing. His eyes were on fire. Hiccup swallowed hard.

"Where is she, son?" Stoick finally said in a low tone that matched his face.

"What?" Hiccup said. Could he possibly know? No, Hiccup told himself. He had to roll with it. "Who are you talking about?"

"I know she's there." Stoick said, taking a step closer and lowering his voice. It sounded like thunder inside the smithy.

Hiccup felt a tightening in his chest, like a fist closing around his lungs. Stoick took another step closer. He was standing arm's length from Hiccup.

"Where's Astrid?" Stoick said in a whisper that was as much thunderous as his shouts, but much more terrifying.

Hiccup tried to speak but nothing came out of his mouth. Not that he could find the words even if he could speak. He choked on them, spit them out in mumblings and half-words.

"Stop. Stop. Stop, son." Stoick held up a hand to his son's ramblings. "I know. There's no need to hide her from me any longer. I heard you two speaking."

"Dad, I can explain." Hiccup began, throwing his arms out in beggar's fashion.

A strong hand on his shoulder pushed him aside. Stoick took another step to the door when it opened from the other side. Astrid must have heard the entire thing. How could she not have? She was standing in the doorway, tentative apprehension on her face.

Stoick staggered in his last step. His squinted eyes searched the girl before him, and after a long moment he sighed.

"Please, Dad it's not—" Hiccup started to say but was halted mid-sentence by his father's hand.

"Meet me back at the house. It's time for a talk." Stoick said, to both Hiccup and Astrid. "And don't dally. This is serious."

"Yes, Dad." Hiccup said, defeated but relieved that the situation hadn't turned dire in that instant.

Stoick marched from the smithy and toward the house without another word. Hiccup let out a great sigh he didn't know he was holding in.

The village was gaining speed on the day and Astrid couldn't just walk through town. Stoick knew that. Hiccup sighed at the idea that his father wasn't going to throw Astrid out to the suspicious stone-throwers before talking it over first. Maybe Hiccup was rubbing off on his father.

"I guess that picnic will have to wait." Hiccup said. He knew they

couldn't just fly off. Stoick would know and might come looking for them.

Astrid hid her face and hair back inside the short cloak and together they headed around the village to avoid unwanted attention. Hiccup had a feeling that they wouldn't have to worry about her being seen much longer.

"You know," Astrid whispered when the house was in sight. "We could just fly away. Like Esol."

"I couldn't do that to my dad." Hiccup shook his head. Although, the idea of just running away from his problems had its appeal. But where would they go? How would they survive? "Besides, this is home. We can't abandon it."

He said 'we' but meant that 'he' couldn't.

At the house Stoick was sitting in his chair by the fire. A small pot of stew simmered over it. He was staring into the fire and did not look up as the door opened and closed.

"Sit down." Stoick said at last.

Hiccup and Astrid sat across the fire from him on the warmed floor. They did not intertwine their fingers or arms as they would have done in the smithy. This was not the time for affections.

Stoick sighed, and glanced over the fire at Hiccup. Now that they were at home his chiefly disapproval had subsided and left his capacity for fatherly disappointment greater. He rubbed his face with his hands.

"Son, I want you to tell me what happened." Stoick said.

"I can't, exactly." Hiccup said. "I made a promise not to."

Stoick sighed, this time more exasperated.

"Honest, Dad, Iâ€¦" Hiccup started but was silenced again.

"I know, Hiccup. I know what you've done." Stoick said. He shifted in his chair. "That devil woman approached me too, after it was decided that your mother was dead."

Hiccup felt something catch in his throat.

"Left me finish, son. This is a story you need to hear." Stoick said. "That woman came to me, and offered me a choice. I'm guessing she gave you the same option."

His fire-darkened eyes flickered on Astrid. She looked away.

"Yes." Hiccup said.

"I never thought this would have been a story you'd need to learn from." Stoick said, sighing again. "I assumed that you would make the right decision, as I did."

Hiccup opened his mouth to argue.

"The dead are dead and meant to stay that way. Such things aren't supposed to be messed with. The door is only meant to go one way and you've ripped it the other. Thor only knows what wicked horrors come slithering out from there. Now, I am happy to see your face again, Astrid, I didn't think Hiccup would ever be as happy without you. But I am disappointed that you would indulge in such sorcery, son."

Silence consumed. Hiccup glanced halfway at Astrid who was staring listlessly into the fire. What was she thinking?

"I have seen signs, Hiccup." Stoick said after the pause. "Signs that I've only heard about from my father, and my father's father."

"What signs?" Hiccup asked. He hadn't seen anything. Or he wasn't aware of them.

"Fire on the half-moon, ghost-howls from the sky carried on cold winds, black storm clouds that bring no thunder, no lightening, no rain." Stoick recalled.

"What do they mean?" Hiccup asked. He'd never heard of any of them.

"According to the legends black storm clouds that brought no storm were a reflection of the darkness gathering unchecked. Immortal horrors, my granddad called them. Things we mortal Vikings shouldn't see until we've gone to the other side. The ghost-howls were the dead trying to come through the gap between death and life, their cries echoing through the cold winds that blew through. Fire on the half-moon meant the gateway was opened, the underworld was swallowing us whole." Stoick said. "It was a few nights ago, the night I assume you came back to us."

Hiccup followed his father's gaze to Astrid. She was still staring into the fire. "I didn't see any of those."

"You weren't outside." Astrid added quietly.

"That's right." Hiccup said. He'd been in the cave with Astrid. Even if the sky had been black with clouds and the moon fire-red, he wouldn't have seen it. He was too preoccupied with Astrid. "Well, what do you want me to do now?"

"I don't know." Stoick shook his head. "This has never happened before. I wish I knew how to handle it. This is your problem, son. You made it, you must deal with it. If you are going to be chief one day you will need to take control of any situation. Consider it a lesson."

Hiccup sighed.

"You were going to take the day on an island, weren't you?" Stoick said to them as if it were any casual conversation. "Take it. Let Astrid be seen, and then take her away from the village to let the news settle."

"I thought you were going to let me handle it?" Hiccup shrugged, although grateful for the advice. That plan was better than anything

he'd been able to drum up in the few moments.

Stoick sighed. Hiccup stood up and Astrid followed him. She took the cloak off her head, apprehension over both of their faces.

Outside the sun seemed too bright. The exposé of secrets. The village was brimming with daily activity. Hiccup and Astrid took the same out-of-the-way path around the village to the stables. It was in an effort to avoid the most attention however it was impossible to be invisible.

Astrid didn't need to look up to see the furrowed brows of confusion or the gapping mouths in wonder. Whispers flew with questions and fingers began to point in disbelief. She took a quick step to walk closer to Hiccup.

"Alright, there?" Hiccup asked as the stables come into view.

"I half-expected a rock to come flying at me." Astrid said in a spiteful tone. Although she wouldn't change being a Viking for anything she hated their suspicious and rash decision making qualities.

"I think that's more of a mob thing. They'll wait until there's a crowd before they start shouting and throwing things." Hiccup shrugged. His humor was well intended but received with a doubtful sigh. "Come on, there's Toothless."

He bounded out of the stables to Hiccup with such overwhelming joy it was hard not to smile. He wasn't use to spending this much time away from Hiccup. He nuzzled him, licked him to the ground, twitching with joy. Hiccup shouted in defense of himself. Toothless was not obstructed in the least and instead of Hiccup, nuzzled Astrid with the same affection.

"Hey, bud, let's go before the mob appears." Hiccup said to the dragon with pet-affection, however these words were not wasted on Astrid.

"That's not funny." she said as she climbed onto the dragon's saddle.

"I know." Hiccup said. "That is why we are forgoing packing a picnic and will worry about that when we get there."

Hiccup climbed up and Astrid fastened her arms around him. They fly into the air and the island of Berk grew smaller and smaller. Neither of them looked back to see if there was indeed an angry crowd growing. Hiccup knew that if there was they wouldn't come looking for them first. No, their first move would be to seek out the chief for answers to this anomaly.

"Do you think my dad wanted us to go so he could deal with it himself?" Hiccup asked.

"Why do you ask?" Astrid said in his ear.

"I just get the impression that even though he says that he wants me to learn my own lessons, you know, the 'you're going to be chief one day, son' lessons, that he can't stand by and watch me mess up."

Hiccup said, using his impression of his father.

"He is still your father. He doesn't want to see you fail." Astrid said. "He's torn between being your chief and your father."

"Yeah." Hiccup said. He'd been torn since he was born.

Stoick drummed his fingers on his mug. The water inside rippled with each thump. It would be only a matter of time before there were Vikings at his door, begging for explanation, for plan of action.

There was a quick knock on the door, followed by Gobber run-limping his way inside and closing it quickly behind him.

"Stoick, we've got trouble." Gobber said, breathlessly.

"I know."

"You know?" Gobber asked.

"It's Astrid."

"Oh, you do know. Well then, what's the plan?" Gobber asked. "Vikings aren't the type to listen to reason when it's not theirs."

"Yes, I know."

"Oh, here they come. Ah, they look happy." said Gobber, looking wearily out the front door.

Stoick stood and with a leader's hand guided Gobber away from the doorway. Time to get this over with.

"Stoick!" "Stoick!" the crowd cried. There were a dozen murmurs going through it, each Vikings telling their version of the story.

"Quiet down," Stoick roared above the crowd. It silenced. "One at a time."

And as orderly as Vikings could they told Stoick their hasty stories with suspicious and fearful eyes, wide with what could happen, with rumors that surged between the hours and between the correlating stories, with inflated legends and child's tales. The other dragon riders made an appearance, looking through the crowd with as much confusion but with more curiosity.

The stories were all similar. They had seen Astrid Hofferson, but that was impossible because she was dead. With each mounting story the villagers were more fearful, more nervous, more ready to lynch the look-alike. The unknown was equal to danger, and danger was met with axes and shouts. The dead were dead, they all said. How could she suddenly not be dead anymore? Was she a ghost? What should they do? She must be a ghost, a demon, a wraith, impersonalizing the Hofferson girl, using her as a meat puppet to achieve its demonic means. They had to act on this demon before it attacks or does them harm.

"That monster is with your son, Stoick! Aren't you going to act?" Spitelout called from the crowd. There was a murmuring agreement

around him. Tuffnut was shouting for blood, the imbecile.

There was a resounding worry over Hiccup's safety.

"My son is fine." Stoick said, hands extended to summon calm and quiet. "I assure you the girl is not a ghost. She is just as alive now as she was before she died."

"But how can that be?" a Viking woman cried out from the crowd. Stoick was about to speak again when he caught the eye of the speaker. Ingrid, Astrid's aunt. She was without the fearful and suspicious hate of those around her. She was weary, desperate for answers.

"That, I can't say." Stoick said. "But believe me, she is Astrid."

Ingrid was in disbelief and shock as the others around her murmured in discontent. Stoick didn't know the words to console the poor woman. After Astrid's parents had died Ingrid and Finn had taken her in as their own. Never having a child of their own, Astrid was theirs to raise. After Finn's untimely death Astrid was all the woman had.

"Do not harm the girl." Stoick warned the crowd. "Get back to your duties. Nothing has changed."

Stoick motioned with his hands to the crowd that reluctantly began to disperse. Gobber hung around, uneasy and commenting that the murmuring crowd would only separate into smaller murmuring crowds. Ingrid however did not leave with the rest.

"Is it her, honest?" She asked. "Why hasn't she come home?"

"I can't answer for her, Ingrid." Stoick said. She looked ten years older than she was. It had been one tragedy after another for her. First, Astrid's parents, who had been dear friends to her and a bother and sister-in-law to her husband, then her husband, and finally Astrid. And now those wounds were being ripped back open with all this talk.

"I saw her, just for a moment, and it did look like her." Ingrid said. "But she was dead, Stoick, I saw her myself. How can she be dead one day and not the next?"

"I truly don't understand." Stoick assured her. "But I have spoken with her. I have looked her in the eye, heard her speak. It is her, Ingrid. Hiccup has spent more time with her than I have and he is sure. If anyone could spot deception in her, then he could."

"He is sure?" Ingrid asked. She looked terrible, heartbroken.

"Yes." Stoick nodded. He held open his front door. "Ingrid, there is stew on the stove. Come inside. Gobber?"

"Oh, sounds fantastic. Smells even better." Gobber said, walking inside after Ingrid. "Hope it tastes as good."

Stoick inhaled deeply as he walked back into his own home. He'd had to explain to parents that their children were dead, never that they

had come back to life. In a way it was worse. At least he knew how to handle grieving parents. What should Ingrid feel? Relief? Happiness? It looked as though she felt neither; grief shone on her face, confusion, fear, disbelief, heartbreak.

She felt it too. Someone coming back from the dead wasn't good news. It was strange and abnormal. Which meant other strange and abnormal things were just as possible. And that is what no one wanted to believe.

What was happening on Berk was half a day away from Hiccup and Astrid. They landed on the island, a quarter of Berk's size, built up in dense forests around a volcano. It was a mash of sea stacks that jutted up here and there in violet angles. The soil was rich and prime for life, so many strange green plants grew. Around the volcano a range of jagged mountains pointing upward, ponds and lakes gathering the rainwater that slid down in a curving trail that had been carved from the rocky mountainside. It fell downward in no less than a dozen waterfalls, some a few feet and some taller than a house.

Hiccup's white sandy beach was indeed a very ideal location. The white sand stretched on from a flat arc of land between two jutting cliff faces. On one of the cliff faces the waterfall thrust off its jagged edge and plunged two hundred feet into the ocean below. The sound the rushing water made was rhythmic and soothing, like laying in bed during a rainstorm, the pitter patter of a million drops strumming against the island, everything in a stupor.

They fished and picked a few handfuls of fruit from the island's lush greenery. They steered away from the fruit they didn't know. Hiccup had tried a few and knew which were guaranteed to be safe. They sat out on the beach, Toothless sunbathing and rolling on this back and swatting at the fish in the clear steely shallows.

They both knew that they'd have to go back but neither wanted to talk about it now. It would come eventually and then the worry could be begin. Although neither wanted to admit it, they were both worried. It was impossible not to be.

The sun was on its decent into the waters. Astrid was as comfortable as she could be, laying in Hiccup's arms on a beach. Toothless was snoozing away, dragon-dreams twitching his facial muscles, as if he were chasing something through the air in a daring and exciting race. The wind rustled and the waves pulled away from the sand and crash back, never reaching higher.

Astrid hadn't told Hiccup but she kept hearing the sounds from nothing and the voices from no one. She tried to convince herself that it was all just happenstance, a coincidence. But when do coincidences turn purposeful?

All around her shadows darted this way and that, always just out of her line of sight, always gone when she turned to look. It was like shadows underneath a torch, every where she tried to look they vanished. More and more, the voices and sounds and shadows were joining each other in a horrible performance.

Stoick had said that the dead were crawling through the door trying to get out. What if they had? Then it was all her fault.

But then why could no one else on Berk see them? Were these things happening only to her? regardless of who was with her or where she was or the amount of daylight? She thought she might get used to them but that fear, that terror, of hearing and almost-seeing was taking its toll on her nerves. She was looking over her shoulder, into the shadows, waiting, or else she was trying not to see anything and keeping her head down and her eyes fixed.

Eventually the sun was touching the water, leaking its orange-red golden light onto its surface, stretching from the world's end to the white sand beach. Hiccup sighed. They'd have to go home tonight. There was no getting around it. Sure, they could sleep here and go back tomorrow but that was only delaying their return. They couldn't stay away forever. Better to sneak in under the cover of night than return in broad daylight where everyone could and would see.

He nudged Astrid. She'd been acting strange since that morning, suspicious, like angry Vikings were going to sneak-attack from the shadows. She had her reasons for being weary, and Hiccup understood. He wouldn't press the matter. All he could do was hold her hand and hug her tight, wishing for the best. She was better at the comforting words than he was.

Reluctantly, they started the return trip. Astrid clung tight to him. He was looking ahead, urging Toothless to taking his time and not get there too fast. However, speed was his specialty.

"What's that?" Astrid said in his ear. She was looking down with her cheek resting against his shoulder. She removed her hand from his waist and pointed down.

He followed her pointing finger to a ship-shaped dot on the darkening water.

"A ship?" Hiccup asked. He was suddenly reminded of the last stray ship they'd investigated. "Maybe we should leave it alone."

"There's people moving on it." Astrid said. "I count two."

Hiccup sighed. He was curious just as she was. Besides, this delayed their return. He aimed the dragon for a closer look. It was a ship, alright, with two people on deck. A short man had been looking over the sides, another was at the helm. The man at the helm saw Hiccup first, and put a hand instinctively on the blade at his side.

"Oh, we're not pirates!" Hiccup said quickly.

"Oh, dragon riders." The man at the helm said. He laughed. "I just saw the dragon, and I was ready to fight for my own skin and ship."

Hiccup was relieved, a little. The other man laughed, hands on his hips.

"I heard about these kids that rode dragons but I never thought I'd see one." the short man said. "I'm glad to know it wasn't all legends and stories."

"That must make you from Berk." the man from the helm said.

"I am. How do you know about that?" Hiccup asked.

The men laughed. "Everyone knows about the son of Berk who conquered the mighty Red Death, or Green Death, depending on the storyteller, and trained a Night Fury, and brought peace to his people. It's quite the tavern tale, almost a legend the way some tell it."

"A legend?" Astrid said in Hiccup's ear. He could hear the smile on her lips.

A man came from below deck. His aged face was worn and leathery from a lifetime spent on the water. He walked on the breathing ship like it was standing still.

"Capt'n, this is the boy from Berk who fought the Red Death!" the man at the helm said with a boy's excitement.

The Captain looked at the man at the helm for a moment then turned his gray gaze to Hiccup and Toothless. There was no expression on his face that Hiccup could read. There was nothing of amazement or the slightest wonder, quite different from the two on deck.

"So he is." the Captain said, scanning Hiccup with his gray eyes. They looked over Hiccup's shoulder to Astrid sitting behind him. They squinted, his mouth drawing up into a scowl. He murmured something under his breath. His leather face turned white.

"Captain?" one of the crewmen asked.

"My, what are you still doing here?" the Captain asked, his gray eyes pinned on Astrid, a terrible raw fear spread across his wrinkled face.

"Excuse me?" Hiccup said, interrupted. But the Captain made gave no notice of him.

"You will bring damnation on us all." The Captain said bluntly, his voice roaring like a sea storm.

Hiccup steered Toothless away. They left the ship in the dark of the sea, the darkness swallowing it whole. He felt Astrid grip around him tighter. There was a shake in her hands that hadn't been there before. Her face was against his shoulder. He tried a few times to start a conversation but she made it clear she wasn't up for talking.

And there's chapter ten! Don't worry, I have a plan to where this story is going. I made an outline before I started writing so there's a plan, with an ending. I just wanted you to know that I'm not making this up as a I go. I'm bad at those stories.

Also, on a side note, the things that Astrid is experiencing are inspired from a game I was obsessed with for a good while, "Fatal Frame". It's a ghost-hunting series that came out a while ago where a heroine somehow gets thrown into the middle of this cursed and severely haunted location where your only weapons against the ghosts is this camera. It's the freakiest thing I've ever seen and that creepy atmosphere was what I was trying to mimic.

Also #2, that other story is being outlined. (Whoo!â€|?)

11. Chapter 11: An Encounter

It feels like yesterday I was posting the first chapterâ€|well, actually it feels like it's been a while. Now, anyway. This chapter is the last that I've finished, as of right now, and the others are still in outline form. So who knows? But I am determined to finish this thing, one way or another, eventually.

Thanks for all your reviews!

Chapter 11: An Encounter

Flying in silence was horrible. Hiccup knew that Astrid was bothered by what that captain had said. Berk was coming into view in the distance and he wanted to say something. She was always so good about talking him out of his funky moods and encouraging him and reminding him that it's not all bad. She didn't want to talk, she'd made that clear, and every time he opened his mouth he didn't have the first clue of how to start.

"Don't listen to him, Astrid." Hiccup said at last. "They don't know what they're talking about."

"Did you not see how he looked at me?" Astrid said, meek against his back. She sounded soâ€|defeated. She started to say something else but held it back.

"Astrid, what's bothering you?" Hiccup asked. She'd been acting strange since before the encounter with the ship, all that day in fact. She wasn't her fearless and strong-willed self. "Tell me."

She sighed.

"Astrid, why won't you tell me?" Hiccup turned his head to look at her, the top of her head grazing against his cheek.

"I don't want to bother you with my whining." Astrid mumbled against his shoulder.

Hiccup halted his breath. She didn't want to bother him? With whines? She was so stubborn, and hated to think that she might be bothersome. It was adorable but why did she not think he'd listen?

"I won't think that, I promise." Hiccup said. In the distance the dark spot that was Berk was growing fast from where the night-colored waters met the cloudy spotted starry sky.

Astrid inhaled, held her breath, and let it out slowly. "Okay."

She told him that she had been seeing things. It started out small, momentary, but had increased until they were everywhere. In cracks in the rocks, between trees, in darkened doorways and every shadow. They were horrible things and terrible voices, dead faces and empty eyes and scratching nails.

Hiccup listened to her without interruption. She paused, and buried her face again into his neck, tightening her fists into his

stomach.

Toothless sighed, a slight shake in his head.

Hiccup felt it safe to speak. He parted his lips but she spoke again, muffled into his shoulder.

"Do you think it's them? The dead?" Astrid's voice was barely audible.

Whatever he was going to say escaped him. With those words a horrible icy feeling surged through his spine and wrapped around his brain. A warning resounded. It came in that strange woman's voice; the dead were possessive and feverishly selfish. Had the dead taken his bringing Astrid back to life as a theft from them? Possessive and selfish, were they trying to take her back?

Hiccup's hands curled into fists. He wasn't going to give her back now that he had her. There was no way he was going to lose her twice. But what was he going to do?

Berk came and soon they were gliding over the village. They didn't have to hid in the smithy tonight and Hiccup was only half glad about it. His workshop had felt secluded and safe. He knew that was only a fantasy now that the entire village knew Astrid was among them. She'd be safer at the chief's house. No one was going to just barge in and demand blood.

They hovered over the roof-window that lead right into Hiccup's room. It was dark and quiet inside as they landed at the foot of Hiccup's bed. Hiccup slid off Toothless and held a hand out for Astrid. She took it and landed in his arms a little haphazardly. He padded Toothless and unhitched the saddle with one hand.

"I'm glad to be home too, bud." Hiccup whispered as Toothless nuzzled his hand. Toothless meandered over to his rock-bed and heated it with his plasma-breath and settled into a tight circle on it, keeping his yellow eyes on his rider and the girl in his arms.

"Let's get some sleep." Hiccup said to Astrid. She nodded without a word.

His bed was wider than the cot in the smithy however in here it felt strange to be sleeping so close to Astrid. They'd slept halfway on top of each other the previous nights. This was his bedroom, his bed, and to have someone else in it was strange, even if it was Astrid. It might have been due to his father sleeping nearby, aware Hiccup wouldn't be alone. He couldn't have been okay about that, but Hiccup decided that was another thing he'd worried about when it came to it.

Astrid still clung to him as she slept, inconsistently, in an unsound breathy sleep. It felt as though she was more tightly wound than before. He'd never seen her like this and wasn't sure how to handle it. Hiccup fell asleep listening to her sharp inhales and gasping exhales.

It was an internal gnawing that refused to let Astrid sleep through the night. Twisting, turning, everywhere she turned there they were. They weren't bothering to slip away from her while she dreamt. Their

half-faces glared at her with cold empty eyes, hair plastered with filth, strings hanging from their damaged heads. Hands flung out, streaks just out of her vision, white bloodless fingers stretching, nails blackened, broken and cracked.

Her body was exhausted from fighting their fierce restlessness and losing. She could breathe although a tightness reminded her that with every exhale that the next might not be as easy. She was filled with a terrible anxiety. Every time she woke she would look around Hiccup's dark room. There was nothing there that should cause such irritable feelings. Although the shadows were thicker.

It was all in her dreams.

Hiccup was sleeping so soundly. His even, rhythmic breathing was steady and calm. He snored when he slept on his back. She didn't want to wake him with a nonsensical complaint as bad dreams. That's all it was.

But she felt so restless. She couldn't sleep like this. She would just get up and walk it out, or run it out, or something. Her legs needed to move. She might take a brisk walk around the village to tire them out; her nerves as well as her legs.

Astrid was careful to avoid waking Hiccup as she sat up. They weren't as tangled as they would be on the cot. He'd fallen asleep holding her but in his relaxation he'd turned over onto his back, ushering her over his chest and draping one arm across her shoulders. She lifted her legs from his bed and set her feet gently on the floor.

Toothless stirred, opening one yellow eye halfway. Astrid put a finger to her lips. He sighed, and his eyes closed. He nestled back into sleep.

Astrid climbed upward to the window instead of taking the stairs. There was less chance of waking Stoick this way. Up and out, and she climbed down the house's side and landed on the ground with a soft thump.

The dark caused a fluttering fear. For a moment she was stricken with the debilitating sinking that something was reaching out from the darkness, hands groping from the shadows, elongated scabby hands clasping around her legs. She turned around quickly, looking for anything. There was nothing.

There was nothing there but the feeling remained. Shaking her head, she began to walk toward the village. She'd made a lap or two, or three, and come back. Hiccup wouldn't know. The village was so vast in the darkness. It was submerging, like a smothering hand over her mouth and nose.

Biting her tongue and swallowing what fear she felt, Astrid took off at a jog. It felt unnaturally cold out. There were no stars, only black swirling monster clouds. Why were there no torches lit tonight? They always had some firelight—what was going on? It was so dark the entire village felt deserted.

Her breath was hard to come by. Was she out of breath from running or was there no breath to be had? Gasping for air, she stopped and bent

down, her hands supporting her upper body on her knees.

A sudden presence within her immediate proximity threw her forward a few feet, stumbling to a halt, spinning around to face whatever it was. She wouldn't go down without a fight, breathless or not. She expected passerby but there wasn't anyone, only shadows. Everything was in shadow, the darkest she'd ever seen, sickeningly familiar.

They were moving with twisted liveliness, crawling over each other like worms, slithering and panting, reaching out with inky arms to no purpose or reason.

"Don't leave."

It was little more than a whisper, like its speaker had been under water or beneath a heavy wool blanket. But she knew she had heard it. It had been close; and within that brief moment of confusion they were upon her.

The looming shadows grew faces; horrible death-wrought skin of blue and gray and gapping holes of missing eyes, their stringy patches of hair on peeling scalps, broken bones poking through and exposed under skin thin and taunt, reaching ever upward, grasping, calling through gapping mouths and dead teeth, crying in howls and demented tormenting wails.

Where was anyone else? She'd been left to fight these monster on her own. Astrid found no where to evade them. They were surrounding; from the ground they crawled with nails and twisted limbs, from above they slid over rooftops and glided on intangible feet. Their continuous murmur was pounding, heartless voices full of contempt, fear, anxiety, and hatred.

She'd couldn't escape them. More were always behind her.

"Don't go." "Stay." "Don't leave." They were all the same. "You belong with us."

Astrid felt a cold hand on her arm. Its owner was a leering woman of long black hair, nonexistent eyes, replaced with cold white orbs. Her neck was bent horrible at an unforgivable angle. The others were closing in, their terrible hands outstretched and grasping.

"Stay away from me!" Astrid pleaded, the restlessness in her chest pounding with anxiety, fear growing rampant and undeniable. She tried to break the grip but it was solid despite the un-solidity of the owner. The hands were numerous, each as cold as the next.

She felt it. A downward pulling. A cooling of her bones, like an intoxication that pulls the mind and body apart. She was being pulled back to the dead.

"Astrid." her name joined the murmuring crowd. A harder grip squeezed her arm. Her restlessness was becoming exhaustion, and sleeping sounded so nice

"Astrid!"

No, that voice didn't belong to them. It was different. Its tone

set it apart. Strong. Spirited.

"Astrid!"

The hard grip on her arm doubled to her other, its owner a black shadow in front of her. Its features were obscured, blanketed by the thick darkness. It was among the crawling dead, hands reaching outwardâ€|and yetâ€|she knew it.

She knew it!

"Astrid!" It called again. "Astrid, look at me!"

It was his voice. He was there. He was pulling her back from the dead yet again. Astrid leaned into the shadow despite the tugging sleepiness and the multiple freezing grips. She didn't need to sleep. She had been for so long. He was there and that was the direction she wanted to go.

The shadow's face eased from the shroud, its life-colors blurring the familiar face of green eyes and freckles. The rest of him followed and his blurry figure engulfed hers.

"Astrid?" Hiccup said to her, his voice lesser in panic than it had been, and much closer. She could feel his heart beating.

"Hiccup," Astrid pleaded into his shirt, burying her face as to not see the horror around her, and so that he couldn't see her naked fear. "Make them stop. I don't want to go back."

Hiccup kept his arms tight around her. He'd been asleep when Toothless nosed him. At first he brushed him off rolling over to his other side. Toothless didn't give up, nosing him harder and knocking Hiccup to the floor. He landed with a thud. Hands in the air, he tried to push the concerned dragon away.

"What is it, bud?" Hiccup asked, a bit irritated. He had heard something from outside. That's when he noticed the bed was empty. Hoping on Toothless, they flew out of the window and into the village. Astrid was kneeling, lost in a nightmare he couldn't see.

Hiccup carried her to Toothless and held her as they went back to the house. He lit a candle for light. She was trembling with a fear that he'd never seen before. Astrid was not easily frightened, which told Hiccup that whatever had shaken her this much was that terrifying, that much more fearful than anything he'd imagined.

Stoick was waiting by the fire when Hiccup started down the stairs with Astrid a few steps behind him.

"I'm glad you chose to sleep here instead of the smithy. It's safer." Stoick said, his glance flickering to the closed door. Hiccup caught his concern. Even though he disapproved, he cared. "Astrid, I think it's a good idea if you spoke to Ingrid."

Astrid made an audible sound, so soft that Hiccup was sure his father didn't hear it. He glanced at her and she answered with a shrug. She looked pale, her eyes were tired and her balance was off.

"Might as well." Astrid said. "It's not like it's a secret anymore."

Hiccup nodded. He led the way to the door and opened it for her, the bright sunlight so high and clean. It felt refreshing despite what they were walking into. Hiccup jogged the step that was between them, enough to stand beside her. The village down below looked so peaceful.

"Ready for this?" Hiccup asked.

"Are you?" Astrid tried to smile over her shoulder at him but it was tentative and nervous. In this bright sunlight she looked worse.

They started to head down the slope to the village, to Ingrid's house, to Astrid's house. Toothless trotted behind them. It wasn't long before people started to notice. Two Vikings were pulling water from the well. At the sight of Astrid their faces turned into shock and the bucket fell back down with a ploosh. They looked at each with a quick glance, mouths agape.

And from them it was a fire on dry grass; Vikings peered around corners and through doors, stopped dead in their tracks to stare as if they were naked, AND on fire. But no one took a step closer, only stared with weary eyes. They made it to the Hofferson house without a squabble, much to Hiccup's relief.

Astrid paused at the door.

"Should I knock?" She asked.

"It is your house." Hiccup said.

"Is it?" Astrid asked. She inhaled sharply and opened the door. Hiccup stepped in after her. The door closed behind her with a breath of relief. She looked at Hiccup, who was thinking the same thing. There had been a striking amount of inactivity. "Your dad told them not to, didn't he?"

"Yeah, I'd bet he did." Hiccup said, remembering his father's speech about solving his own problems without help. He wasn't doing a very good job at it.

The house appeared empty but someone was upstairs. Astrid took a step further in, her hands gently curled in front of her chest, ready to act. It must be strange, Hiccup thought, to be a stranger in her own house.

"Aunt Ingrid?" Astrid called out. "It's me."

There was some sort of commotion upstairs, something being dropped onto the wooden floor. There came footsteps, even, but unsure, and Ingrid appeared at the top of the stairs. She said nothing at first, but looked downward with a mouth ready to speak but finding no words.

"Aunt Ingrid, it's me. Astrid." Astrid said, hands dropping to her sides. She had that defeated look on her face again. Hiccup wanted to say something, intervene, but didn't know how.

"You certainly look like her." Ingrid said in a low voice. She looked tormented, her eyes narrowing at Astrid. She was staying put on the stairs.

Hiccup swallowed hard. Ingrid was in disbelief. She looked at Astrid like she was a monster, something unnatural. They all did. It wasn't going to be easy to pretend that the past year hadn't happened.

"I am Astrid." Astrid said, her voice strong but Hiccup could hear the pleading hidden underneath it. She was trying to be strong, just like she always did.

"I don't believe you." Ingrid said plainly, as blunt as Astrid.

"That's fine." Astrid said just as plainly. "I didn't except you to."

Astrid turned to leave, and Hiccup didn't make her stay. He followed her back outside where the sunlight seemed a little less bright, and a bit stale. Hiccup closed the door and caught a brief glance of Ingrid. She had taken a step down the stairs, a hand outstretched as if she'd reached out then drew it back in. Her face was a mixed expression of hurt and confusion.

"I'm sorry." Hiccup said as the door closed.

"It's fine. I knew she'd be like that. I didn't want to argue with your father." Astrid shrugged. She looked around the village. Vikings had gathered, more than before, waiting; they scattered with nonsensical business as they'd stepped back outside. But they all kept one eye on her. "Hiccup, let's go for a flight."

He wasn't going to argue with her, but before he could call to Toothless they were interrupted. They all appeared at once, as if tied together. The other riders, looking stubborn but curious.

"When did this happen?" Snotlout asked, or demanded. He gestured to Astrid, then crossed his arms. He was upset that there had been a worthy adventure that he'd missed out on.

"Wellâ€¦" Hiccup started. What to say?

Tuffnut and Ruffnut were standing a few feet away, whispering behind their hands. Tuffnut held the end of a stick. He reached out and tapped Astrid with the end of it. Once, twice, and Astrid grabbed the end and yanked it from his hand and hit him over the head with it. He yelped as the stick broke in two.

Ruffnut was laughing as he picked it up. "Not Stickyâ€¦it's so hard to find good poking sticks. Spend all day looking that one."

"Hiccup, are you sure this was a good idea?" Fishlegs asked. He spoke like Astrid wasn't even there.

"I'm right here, Fishlegs." Astrid said, irritated.

"Are you?" Snotlout said. "Or are you just a ghost imitating

her?"

"If I was, Snotlout, why would I be?" Astrid crossed her arms.

"Toâ€|" Snotlout mumbled.

"To control our minds with your ghost powers." Tuffnut said, as if this was the most obvious thing.

"Geeze, I thought everyone knew that." Ruffnut added.

"Guys, it's Astrid." Hiccup said, flatly, trying to mimic his father's stern authority.

"But how?" Fishlegs asked.

"That'sâ€|" not important." Hiccup said.

"Butâ€|" everyone knows that people who go messing with dark stuff always end up in horrible situations." Fishlegs said, like a terrified child in the dark after a ghost story.

"Like Bigfist the Tall. He pretending to be Thor and got punished by spending the rest of eternity in a lighting storm." Snotlout added.

"Or Termite Tom who cursed Odin and tried to climb to the sun and was cast out to a deserted island with nothing but grass to eat." Ruffnut chimed in.

"Oh, or Liam the Liar who spends the rest of his mortal life in a living inescapable nightmare!" Tuffnut said.

"What did he do?" Fishlegs asked.

"I don't know. Something horrible." Tuffnut shrugged.

Hiccup felt Astrid shift beside him.

"He probably tried to bring dead people back to life." Snotlout said.

Toothless was sniffing a barrel of fish but jumped when Hiccup called to him. He bounced over, not sharing the animosity that was being so plentifully shared. He trotted to separate Astrid and Hiccup from the others. They climbed on, not wasting anymore time.

"We'll continue this talk later, young man." Tuffnut said, stomping a foot and pointing to the ground. Ruffnut laughed as Toothless took off, and Hiccup looked down just in time to see her punch him, sending him to the ground, and another fight between them begin.

They quickly left the village behind and burst through a low layer of clouds. They flew steady and enjoyed the crispness of the high-air. Astrid buried her head against his shoulder.

"Astrid," Hiccup said. They had to talk about it. "About last nightâ€|"

"I know." Astrid said weakly.

"What's happening?" Hiccup sighed.

"The dead, Hiccup. They are trying to pull me back." Astrid said.
"They won't leave me alone. They're everywhere, in shadows and in my dreams, and everywhere I look. They're waiting to strike, to catch me off guard. Hiccup, what do I do?"

"I don't know." Hiccup said. He didn't know how to fend off the dead.
"I probably should have told you, but before I started the ritual, that woman told me that the dead were possessive and selfish. Opening the door between worlds would cause confusion, and they all might want to come through."

"So you knew this would happen?" Astrid asked, a bit sharply.

"I guess I just didn't think it would." Hiccup said.

"Is the rest of my life going to be like this? Running, constantly, trying to get away from them until I slip and they get me? I can't. I can't live like that."

"We could go to Gothi. She might know. Or that woman might be there still. She came with Trader Johan, and I think I saw him this morning." Hiccup said. He steered Toothless down toward the village. It was the only lead they had.

Toothless shook his head with a disliking growl as he saw Gothi's rickety towering house and its wooden plank perch. He hesitated before landing. With a nudge from Hiccup he landed, but not without narrowed eyed glance back at his rider.

"I'm sorry, bud." Hiccup was almost laughing. "We'll be quick."

Hiccup went to the door, knocking quickly. There were steps on the other side, and in a few moments the door was pulled open with Gothi's staff. She was a few feet away from it holding the other end in her rough leathery hands.

"Hi, Gothi, we were wondering whether or not," Hiccup said, fidgeting his hands.

"Say it, boy." said the strange woman from inside the house. She was sitting at the table with a bowl of hot stew in front of her. The yellow-fire was burning on its place in the center of the hearth.
"What is it you need?"

"We need to talk to you." Hiccup said, glancing into the yellow-fire.

"I see." the woman said. Then her voice changed. There was a hint of casual humor in it Hiccup hadn't heard before. It was almost more disturbing that her callous dry tone. "I can't let you in. This isn't my house."

Gothi smiled as if to some joke known only between them. She stepped out of the way and motioned for them to come inside. Hiccup obeyed

and Astrid followed him. The door closed and the house was filled with stark darkness shaded with the yellow flickers of the fire.

"You are lucky with your timing, Hiccup. A few hours later and I would have been gone." said the strange woman, laying her hands in her lap. "So tell me, what do you need?"

"Please, Astrid is being haunted by the dead." Hiccup said.

"Is this true?" She asked Astrid.

"Yes." Astrid sighed.

"Tell me about it." She said, a motherly tone replacing her humor. She truly was a strange person.

"They are everywhere, voices talking to me, wanting me to stay with them, to come back, to come home, and faces watching me from everywhere, in shadows and in my dreams, clawing at me, trying to drag me back with them." Astrid said, deflation and fear in her strong voice. She didn't bother hiding it now. Hearing her talk about it, Hiccup knew how it had bothered her, tormented her. She tried to be strong but her strength couldn't last forever.

Astrid paused, her head laying on her drawn up knees, arms hugging them tight.

"This isn't surprising." the woman said. Her dryness returned. "It is a complicated ritual, one of the most, in fact. Even with the help of a miracle. Your soul, girl, is being torn and pulled, wanted by both realms, living and dead."

"How do we stop it?" Hiccup asked.

She sighed. "That is not something within my power."

"There must be a way," Hiccup said urgently. "To make the dead realize that she isn't one of them. That she belongs here."

Hiccup was clenching his fists white-knuckle tight. He let them go when he noticed his short fingernails leaving half-circles in his palms. There had to be a way. There was a way to bring her back, there was a way to do anything. He had lost her once and he didn't want to lose her again.

"If you want to sever her ties to the other realm completely you must go to the string-puller himself." she said with a hesitation. "Death."

"Death?" Hiccup asked.

"Death the being, the ruler of the dead." said the woman. "He is a wily, unforgiving, and clever creature. He feels no sympathy for the dead or living. To him, any soul that passes into his realm is his, forever and always. Bringing her back does not mean that her soul is no longer his. Ownership, as he will call it, is his."

"But she isn't dead anymore. She doesn't belong with him." Hiccup said.

"That means nothing to him." said the woman. "If you ask him for ownership he will no doubt ask an ungodly price in return. He will know how much her soul means to you, and according to his logic, what could her soul be worth?"

"I have to try." Hiccup said. He didn't have much in terms of wealth, but it was at least worth to know the price. Maybe he could save up, or give him an I.O.U.

"I see." the woman nodded. "I can get you there. But Death is as tricky as he is dead, and just as bitter. However, he is bound by a stiff sense of justice. He keeps his deals, his promises, and delivers what he says, and as such he expects others do to the same. He is a taker of souls, but not a liar or a thief."

"Then I'll do it." Hiccup said.

"Just wait. It comes with another warning." She said. "Traveling to the precipice as a living soul is a dangerous feat. You will encounter trials, snares, and traps. It will not be easy. They will test your mind, heart, and soul. You must be strong to make it through."

Hiccup hesitated, but looking at Astrid he knew there wasn't a option. "I can handle it."

Could he?

"Then we will waste no time." the woman stood up. "Will should return to the cavern. The veil is thinnest there. Go, both of you. I will meet you there after I finish my lunch."

Hiccup nodded. He stood, and grabbed Astrid's hand to pull her up with him. Out the door they went to a impatient Toothless who was staring off the edge restlessly. He was more than happy to see them. Hiccup and Astrid climbed on the saddle and took off from the wavering platform.

Up and up, through the clouds and circling the mountain, Toothless found the crevasse in the ice and flew inside. The cavern was dark as night. Hiccup felt Astrid clutch his shirt tight. He reached down in the darkness and put a hand onto hers. She was shaking. Could she see them in this dark? What was it like to be surrounded by the dead?

"Astrid." Hiccup said.

She murmured into his shoulder.

"I promise, I'll fix this." Hiccup said, squeezing her hand. Her arms around him shifted, hugging him as tight as she could. It hurt a little but he didn't mind.

The oval room was again lit by the strange yellow light. The yellow-fire was where it had been, resting on a stalagmite at the other end, near the empty altar. The water in the tub was still.

"This place is creepy." Astrid whispered.

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing." Hiccup said. He didn't remember it being thisâ€¦unwelcoming. Then again he hadn't been focusing on the room.

The woman appeared as quietly as she had before. Hiccup didn't notice her until her footfalls sounded on the floor. She inhaled the air, held it, and exhaled it.

"Let us not waste anymore time." She said, looking toward the dark pool of still water.

There's chapter eleven!

Does this chapter feel rushed to anyone else? Maybe it's just me. I would like to comment that I threw the other riders in there. I kept trying to find an appropriate place for them to pop in. Found one!

12. Chapter 12: Greeting Death

Thanks for the reviews! I'm glad to hear that someone is enjoying this story. That's really what I want to do with my life - I want to be a writer, and to write stories that makes people happy.

Chapter 12: Greeting Death

The strange woman was leaning precariously over the dark water. It was calm beneath her gaze and black as night as she whispered to it. Astrid closed the space between Hiccup and herself. Her cautious hands folded together over her chest. Hiccup felt the change in the air. It was colder. The very energy in the cavern had changed. It was darker.

An icy, crisp wind blew from the back of the cave. It seemed to come off the water, ebbing its darkness along, cold and angry. Hiccup moved his arm in front of Astrid. It was involuntary but she didn't seem to mind. The light dimmed like a candle that had been blown out. Suddenly, all light within the cave was engulfed in the blackest darkness.

Hiccup reached out for Astrid and found her reaching back for him. In the short moment it took for their hands to clutch, the darkness subsided. It was sucked into the dark waters which churned and shook.

"What was that?" Astrid choked out.

Hiccup understood the quiver in her voice. It was like the air had been sucked from his lungs, pulled out from their mouths by the retreating darkness. It left him breathless, a cold coating in his throat where the air had been taken.

"It is ready." said the strange woman. She looked back at them, her eyes tentative but steady, and as dark as ever. She stepped away from the roaring waters and motioned to it with her boney hands.

Hiccup squeezed Astrid's hand and then let it go. He took the few steps toward the water's edge but Astrid jogged the few feet to catch

him.

"Wait, Hiccup, I'll go with you!" Astrid said, her blue eyes full of that worry she reserved for him.

"No, Astrid. You need to say here." Hiccup said. He turned to face her, to look her in the eye when he rejected her offer.

"No, Hiccup." Astrid argued. "This is all because of me. It's my problem, let me deal with it."

"It's too dangerous." Hiccup said. That fighting spirit was coming back into those eyes. It almost made him want to argue more, to push against her, to tease that spirit out of her, that anger and energetic spirit. He'd missed that so much.

"He is right." said the strange woman. "The path will be dangerous. The fewer that go, the better. And Death still holds claim to your soul."

Astrid audibly disagreed in a ragged sigh of exasperation. Hiccup reached for her hand again and finding it, pulled her closer and kissed her cheek. He tried to give her an encouraging smile but she did not return it.

"Just be careful." Astrid sighed. "And come back."

"I promise." Hiccup said, waiting for her to return the smile, but all she could do was a weak grimace.

Hiccup let go of her as she stepped to the pool's side. The woman stood at its base and motioned to Hiccup. He guided him by the shoulders to stand exactly where she had been. Letting go of his shoulders she stood back.

"What do I do?" Hiccup asked, thoroughly confused. He hadn't known what to expect when she said he's visit Death. Maybe a door, a stairwell spiraling forever downward. He'd tried not to think about it.

"Step into the water." the strange woman said. "Or rather, through it."

"What?" Hiccup asked. He looked over his shoulder at the woman and once he was sure she was completely honest, he looked back into the black water. It was gentle, but moving in unnatural rolls and coughs. It looked less friendly than when it was frothing and boiling, and colder somehow.

"Step through." said the woman.

Hiccup inhaled, preparing for the cold water to rush his face, and stepped with his fake leg into the water. He closed his eyes and expected the very solid and very real bottom of the stone tub to impact on his metal leg and send that uncomfortable shock through his body when he stubbed it hard enough. He felt a brief surge of cold water but then as soon as it came over him it left. It felt more like going through a cloth covered doorway, if the cloth was made of ice and spider webs.

Hiccup opened his eyes to one of the strangest place he'd ever seen. He wasn't standing on solid ground but floating in a dark gray mist. It was swirling and glazing over in thick layers, darkness peeking from the other side. He tried to move but his movements were jerky and flighty. He couldn't tell if he was getting anywhere or not. There was nothing to keep him down, nothing to tell him if he was going up or down, or even right side up.

Was he moving forward? He couldn't tell. Nothing was moving around him. He tried to speak. The words came out like they were miles away, screaming over the emptiness of a valley. There was no echo. He tried again and the same thing happened.

His initial panic rose and fell, ebbing away but not vanishing. He had to find this Death person. Was he a person? How would he find him in this chaos? Would he just appear? Hiccup tried to call out to him, or it, or whatever, but nothing happened. He tried to swim, flinging his arms out and kicking his legs, anything to move. He couldn't tell if he was moving or not.

Astrid watched as Hiccup stepped into the water and vanished. The water swallowed him whole, consuming his body, and coming together like he'd never been there. Toothless whined behind her, not wanting to come any closer to the pool or the altar than he had to. She kept her eyes on the water but it was still, as it had been before.

There was nothing underneath the surface to suggest a body. There was nothing. He was just gone.

"Will he be alright?" Astrid asked the strange woman. She felt that sinking stone in her gut. It was the same feeling she'd get when Hiccup would soar away on Toothless. He was outside her range of protection. If something happened now there would nothing she could do.

The woman looked at her, as if in an internal debate, and then closed her dark eyes and inhaled deeply. "He will face trials that draw their energy from him."

"What does that mean?" Astrid asked. Was it some sort of test? A proving of skill? "Hiccup isn't a fighter. Especially without Toothless."

Toothless gave a snort of agreement.

"They will not be physical trials." the woman said. "They will be challenges of the mind and soul, picking at the heart with prickly fingers."

"Like what?" Astrid asked. Hiccup was strong, but a bit naïve and optimistic, and he had his limits.

"Fears, worries." The woman said. "Deep rooted fears will become apparently reality, testing his resolve, his internal strength. Hiccup must be strong enough to see past these illusions and be able to accept their possibility."

"What happens if he fails?" Astrid asked.

The woman hesitated, her lips slightly parted.

"What happens if he fails?" Astrid asked again, her voice raised and stressed.

"If he fails to pass the trials of the dead he will be taken in as one of them. His mind will be taken, lost to what he fears." the woman said in a quiet voice.

"You didn't say he could die!" Astrid shouted.

The woman looked at her with those dark eyes that refused any light. They bore into her, but Astrid refused to be intimidated.

"He must love you dearly to go through all this trouble." the woman said in a motherly voice, a bit kinder, a bit sorrowed.

Astrid swallowed the words that were fumbling in her throat. He must. He had told her a few times. It felt strange to think about it. He loved her enough to go through all this trouble. To have someone like Hiccup so close to her was so overwhelming and heartwarming at the same time. It made it easier to breathe but too close to that same breath.

"Do you love him in return?"

The question interrupted her thinking and threw her thoughts off balance. She hesitated but then quickly answered. "Yes, of course I do."

The strange dark woman eyed Astrid with an unreadable expression. Whatever she was looking for Astrid didn't know. She wished the woman would look away but Astrid wasn't going to blink first.

"I have lived a long life and met a good many people. I have seen many of those people under the claim of love." the strange woman said. She shifted her arms. "I have seen very few who have what you two have. You have found something special that people search their entire lives for and never find."

Astrid didn't have the words to answer that. She didn't know how life would be without Hiccup. What would she have done if he'd been absent? In all honesty she couldn't imagine her life without him, dead or not. It would be lonely. But, if she hadn't met him, that loneliness wouldn't be so prevalent.

If he didn't come back Astrid didn't want to think about it. If he didn't come back then there wasn't a reason to fight for her life anymore. Everyone else on Berk hated and feared her.

Hiccup was lost. The space-dust walls were swirling but didn't seem to be moving. He couldn't tell if he'd made any progress at all. There was no ground, nothing to compare distance to.

As if listening to his thoughts solid ground rammed underneath him. He fell to his knees with the impact. He felt a bit weary like he'd just woken from a dream. It was all a bit foggy. The sun was poking through thick gray clouds. It had just stopped raining. The dirt underneath his knees and hands was soggy and cold.

Something had happened. It had been his fault. Vikings were glaring

at him with their eyes fiery with disappointment. They were shaking their heads disapprovingly.

"Why can't you just listen?" "You ruined everything." "What's wrong with you?"

Hiccup was confused. He stumbled backward. There was so much blood on the ground. Had there been an attack? Yes, there had. There were large bones here and there. By their size they could only be dragon bones. There'd been an attack; a dragon attack. He'd messed it up, again. But that's just what he was: a screw-up. Everyone knew it.

He felt the resurgence all the emotion headlock of being disliked and unwanted, but, there was something amiss. No, Hiccup shook his head. This was all wrong.

"No, we don't fight dragons anymore!" He shouted at the angry Vikings. Where were all the dragons? Hiccup had brought peace to the Vikings and dragons. They were friends now. He and Toothless changed everything. They'd battled the Red Death, and won.

The ground shifted, sending Hiccup backwards. The impact on his back pushed his breath out with a hard thump. The ground under him was hard and smelt of blood. It coated his hand with soot and ash as he rolled onto his stomach. He looked around quickly, panic set in as he saw Berk was on fire. The grass was sparse and spotted with dark fire-marks. Thunder pounded in his ears. Burning houses toppled down in flaming debris. Vikings screamed from every direction.

Hiccup stood. His breath caught in his throat. This was Berk. It was on fire and with unnatural quickness was burning to the ground. Women were screaming. Men were shouting. Children were crying. Somewhere a baby was howling. The ocean beyond was a mass of black ships, sails drawn tight, swords flashing and bashing, blood soaked and gleaming.

This was his fault. Berk was nearly gone.

"The worst chief Berk has ever see." "You've killed us all!" "How could you?"

He'd let this happen, his people, his village, he'd let them down. He could do nothing while the entire village went up in smoke. He was a horrible chief. He couldn't run a village and keep it oiled. Everything was falling out of place. He'd brought this invasion to their beaches. Berk was no longer. His people were gone. His tribe, gone.

Hiccup coughed in the smoke. Where was his father? He would know exactly what to do. No, Hiccup stumbled to the ground, this wasn't right either. His father was fine. Hiccup wasn't chief. He wouldn't let this happen. He wasn't chief.

"Hiccup?" Stoick called. Hiccup threw himself upward. His father would know what to do. He always did. But when he stood up Stoick was no where to be seen.

"Dad?" Hiccup called back.

"Hiccup." Stoick said, his voice farther away and weaker.

"Dad!" Hiccup shouted. And from the dust-space swirls Stoick appeared. He was ragged and pale. Hiccup tried to reach him but he couldn't shorten the space between them. Right before his eyes his father withered, graying and wrinkling at an alarming rate. He turned all gray, skin and hair, his hands too feeble to lift an axe.

"Dad!" Hiccup shouted at him, to wake him up, anything. He collapsed into dust and bones onto the burnt ground. "DAD!"

Hiccup struggled with whatever held him in place. Stop, he told himself. Stop, this isn't real. His father was fine, on Berk, which was not on fire or under attack. He was fine. Alive. No one could age that fast. This was all a trick.

"A trick." Hiccup said aloud. His voice sounded far away again, like someone was whispering close or shouting from a distance.

A dragon-roar thundered above him, a Night Fury's call. Hiccup looked skyward for Toothless. He was flying above him, circling. He was flying, Hiccup noticed, alone. There was no saddle on his back, no tailfin mechanism keeping him afloat. His tail was complete, black fin mirroring black fin.

Hiccup reached up for him, and Toothless began a nosedive downward. Hiccup caught the dragon in his hands, bursting through the swirling mist.

Hiccup was riding on his back, the wind rushing past, the ocean flying below. The waves were high and the water was icy cold with chunks of ice floating in the steel gray. They collided and crashed sending ice tumbling into the water below with a horrible cracking.

Hiccup couldn't hold onto Toothless. The saddle was gone and there was nothing keeping him attached. Hiccup was pulled off, leaving Toothless to fend for himself. Suddenly, his tail was incomplete. Toothless fought through the air like a drowning rodent. Hiccup was floating in midair, unable to move while his dragon fell into the icy waters below.

"Toothless!" Hiccup screamed through the cold wind. It stung his face. The black spec was pulled under the water and did not resurface. "Toothless!" Hiccup reached out for him but could not move. Something poked through the steel colored water between waves, a black immobile spec.

Hiccup screamed at the waves. His hands were shaking as he tried to reach out and grab him.

No, stop. Hiccup told himself although he was shaking. No. Toothless was on Berk. That was not on fire. With his father. Who was alive. Toothless wasn't with him. He had come by himself.

Hiccup shut his eyes tight and clutched his hands over his ears. He screamed, and the wind howled past him and vanished. His voice was as far away as it had been. His heart was thundering in his chest. He clutched at it, trying to make it stop. It hurt. It was all so real.

"Hiccup?"

Hiccup flinched with fear of what could come next. He knew that voice and did not want to see its owner in whatever horrible peril she was in.

"Hiccup?" her hand clutched his wrist, a tight grip and made him look.

Astrid was falling toward him, arms outstretched, skin paled, a gapping hole in her chest. Her white ribs were jabbing like teeth through her pink insides. Blood seeped onto her clothes. Her skin was cold, snow-colored. She fell into his arms and he caught her, hot blood soaking into his clothes and saturating his skin.

"Help me." Astrid said, her body graying, flaking as if made of ash. She was decaying in his arms. Her skin and hair turning to gray dust and falling through his fingers. A plume of gray dust pouted into the air as she vanished, leaving behind a pile of dust in his arms and on his legs.

"Astrid?" Hiccup said to it like she would reappear. Her blood was cold on his skin. "No!"

He clawed at the dust trying to put it back together. It vanished too, like water into dry dirt. He clawed at the nonexistent ground with no prevail. "Astrid!"

"No." Hiccup told himself, face in his hands. "No, I brought her back. She's alive. Astrid, she's fine. She's on Berk, with Toothless, with my father, and nothing is on fire. It's all fine."

"Hiccup!" Astrid's voice.

Hiccup dared to look at this new horror. What could be worse than turning to dust in his arms?

Astrid was being trailed by a mob of angry, torch-armed Vikings, rocks at the ready in their hands. They were shouting. Before Hiccup could rush to her rescue he was held back. They had tied her hands behind her, gagged her, and set her atop a sacrificial pyre. She was struggling to free herself but she wasn't fast enough. All round the pyre Vikings were shouting.

"Demon, demon, demon!" "Send her back where she belongs!"
"Monster!"

Hiccup couldn't move. He couldn't reach her. They were so angry. He'd put this torment onto her. He'd done this. All he could do was watch her squirm against the restraints as the fire climbed high through the dry wood of the pyre. Up, and up, and consumed, until she was a struggling shadow among the bright flames.

There were tears in his eyes. They fell from his face and dripped onto the swirling ground, vanishing into it. Hiccup slammed a fist onto the ground. It made a hollow thump.

No, he told himself over and over. It's not real. It's a trick. Astrid is fine, in the cave where no one can find her. She is with Toothless. His father is on Berk, which is not on fire. He was chief,

Hiccup was not. They were all fine.

Hiccup was trying to save Astrid but not from angry Vikings. From death. From Death. This was all a lie, a trick, to make him forget. And he couldn't. He couldn't let her down again.

Hiccup fell and landed on a stone hard floor void of color and made of the space-dust that swirled never-ending. He was in a room of sorts with walls made of gray-white sticks. No, Hiccup thought as he looked at the walls closer. They weren't sticks. They were bones. Bones woven together to make tight walls, like threads, like hair. There was no door and there weren't any windows.

It was cold and dark, like a cave but more suffocating, more threatening. The air was still and stung his lungs like airborne ice. Each breath stung, ice daggers pointing fine points into his chest.

"Welcome to the in-between. It has been a long time since a mortal survived the trek." A voice of dry humor, as dark and dank as the bone-room, Death stood at the far end. A tall slender human-shaped figure draped in darkness, face and hands hidden beneath. His very presence filled Hiccup with beat-skipping dread. "It is always interesting when the living come to me rather than me to them. Are there so many so eager to see me?" A dry laugh like earth-shaking thunder. "Or do you wish to lay a complaint upon my table?"

Hiccup gathered himself. He decided quickly to start from the beginning. "Please, I need your help. I lost someone very close to me and I went through a lot to bring them back. But-

Death put on a boney, leathery black hand. "I know why you've come. It is about the girl's soul you stole from me. You want complete ownership, as if she had never died."

Hiccup started to say something but the words caught in his throat. "Yes."

Death let out a low chuckle. It sent shivers down Hiccup's spine and stood his hair on end. "I believe the only equal price for something is itself, thus an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, a life for a life. What could equal the soul of a human besides another? However, the price of something is weighted not by its very being but by its value to the buyer, and seller. In this sense, what could possibly be equivalent to the soul of a loved one? The soul of another loved one? No, for we do not love equally. The love of a mother is different from that of a friend, which is different than that of a lover."

Hiccup wanted to say something but he didn't know what. He was not in charge of his debate. Death was. He had been warned by the strange woman but he was still unprepared.

"You are not the first and won't be the last." said Death. His voice was dry, cynical, and strong. "I have been here long enough to know that there is always someone begging over loss. Someone is always dying before their time and someone cannot accept it. A lover, a friend, a parent, a child, each argument is the same. Someone can't live without someone else. What if I were to let anyone that was missed back into life? What would happen then? My world would be empty and yours would be overrun and overpopulated. People die, that

is the way it works. Bodies grow old and fade back into the earth. The material that makes people also makes the earth. It is a cycle we must abide by. Humans are created, they live, they die, and are returned to the earth to make trees, water, clouds. Life, death, it is all a part of it. No one is above the laws of nature. This, people do not understand."

Hiccup felt an emptiness enveloping his chest. He wished that woman was here. She would know what to say to such a creature as death. She understood these things.

"What, then, makes you different?" Death asked.

"Nothing." Hiccup shrugged. He couldn't return empty handed. He had to know. "But what price would it cost to keep Astrid's soul?"

"For the remainder of her human life, as if she hadn't died?" Death said in a hollow laugh. "Humans are always so persistent, so needy, willing to do anything to make the right-now better. Alwaysâ€|living in the moment."

Hiccup swallowed. Was he avoiding the answer because he knew how ghastly it was? Or was he still mulling it over to see what horrible price he could ask?

"I apologize for being long winded. I haven't been bothered by mortals in quite some time." said Death. He was not looking for forgiveness. "But, for the girl's soul, for the remainder of her human life? Let's start the bidding at ten thousand years."

"Ten thousand years?" Hiccup asked. "â€|of what?"

"Oh, yes, I forgot how little humans know. I rarely leave my abode, and haveâ€|servants who go and fetch the dead for me. They are my agents of death, for the lack of an actual job title. For the girl's soul, it would be ten thousands years of servitude. For you, and her."

"Ten thousands years?" Hiccup repeated. It sound soâ€|forever and a day.

"What is ten thousand years when you get, what, fifty or sixty together?" Death snickered with sarcasm. "You'd be collecting, keeping, and organizing the dead. They can be a rough and reluctant crowd, mind you."

Would it be worth it? Would they spend those ten thousand years together? Hiccup thought it over. While in his thoughts, Death laughed.

"What?" Hiccup asked.

"It is a hefty decision. Don't let me rush you." Death said. "However, may I insert that you should ask a woman before you sign her name to a supernatural list."

That was right, Hiccup sighed. He couldn't make Astrid's decisions for her. He sat down in the room. His body felt heavy with thoughts and decisions. What was the right one?

Death let out a empty sigh. Was it a brief moment of sympathy or exasperation?

"I don't know." Hiccup said more to himself than to Death.

"I can give you an alternative." Death said, tentatively, as if he was not sure if he wanted to offer it.

"What?" Hiccup asked.

"As much as I adore children and young lovers, I am no pushover. Everything has a trade, something of equal value. However, there is not just physical value." Death said, his voice low and strong, one that should not be interrupted. "There is a man that has alluded me for nearly five hundred years. If you could find this man and return him to the dead in which he belongs, I will consider your debt paid in full."

Hiccup felt the emptiness in his chest lighten, filling with the flighty air of hope. Finding someone sounded much easier and less time consuming than ten thousand years of enslavement.

"You can choose either." Death said. "You have the rest of your earthly life to return the man. However I will not deliver ownership of the girl's soul until that man is with me. If the man is not returned, I will assume you have chosen servitude. I'll start preparing your list of chores. I'm sure I can find ten thousand years worth."

Death laughed, a hollow and deep thunderous boom. The bone-room around Hiccup dissolved and melted into the black swirling mists, pushing him backward, downward, he couldn't tell the direction. He was moving fast, he could feel the same sensations as when he was flying.

He was being pushed upward. The air around him was thickening. He couldn't breathe and everything was dark. Movement was stifled and muffled—like he was underwater. He thrashed, finding stone in every direction. Then at last when he thought he could hold his breath no longer the surface broke and he felt the cold air of the mountain cave on the other side.

A hand met his with a warm and a sure grip. It pulled him up and gave him a direction. Hiccup gasped for breath as he rose from the water. Astrid was clutching his arms to pull him out. He stumbled out and fell into her.

"Hiccup!" Astrid said over and over. "What happened? Are you alright?"

"Yeah." Hiccup managed to squeeze out between breaths. He caught her hands and held them tight in his. The sight of her being burned alive was still too real in his mind. He sat there beside her, her arms tight around his middle, letting the past moments ebb away. He needed to catch his breath, just for a moment.

"Why don't we go back to your house, Hiccup? You'll be warmer by the fire." Astrid said. No doubt the water from him was clinging to her as well.

Toothless jumped at this prospect. Astrid helped Hiccup stand and they climbed onto the eager dragon. The strange woman nodded as they left the cave behind. The flight back down to the village was done so in bright sunlight. It warmed his face a little but the biting mountain winds were bitter.

They landed straight into Hiccup's room. Stoick was not in the house. It was quiet and still.

"I'll go see about the fire. Maybe something to eat. Change out of those wet clothes." Astrid said, squeezing Hiccup's hand. She trotted down the stairs leaving Hiccup and Toothless upstairs.

While Hiccup looked for dry clothes he could hear Astrid downstairs. He tossed his wet shirt onto the floor. Everything was soaked straight threw. His boot, his pants, everything had to be taken off before he caught a chill. Pulling a dry pair of pants on over his good foot while balancing on the other, he heard Astrid mutter to herself downstairs.

This is what their life together would be like. She would be there for him, and he would be there for her. Together, two sides of a coin, two hands to hold a mug. He heard her at the foot of the stairs as he pulled a shirt over his head.

"Hiccup?" Astrid called.

"Yeah, I'm coming." Hiccup called down to her. She was standing with one foot on the stairs and eyes over her shoulder. She was looking into the dark corners of the room, the darkness confined to the corners and creaks by the bright fire. He picked up his wet boot with one hand and met her at the bottom. Placing it close to the fire it would be dry in no time.

They sat down together beside the fire, closer than they had when Stoick was sitting across from them. It was just them, no one to see, no one to watch, to one to glare suspiciously and murmur at a safe distance.

"Hiccup, what happened withâ€¦you know who." Astrid asked. "Did you actually meet him? Like, a person?"

"I did." Hiccup said. He tried to act like it hadn't bothered him. Her eyes widened. "It wasn't that bad."

"Tell me about it." Astrid leaned on his shoulder.

And that's chapterâ€¦twelve! It's a little longer than the others. I try to keep them around eight pages, give or take a paragraph so. I had another little tidbit on the end of this chapter but seeing as I was already over my page-goal I moved it to the next.

PS - I tried to make the whole scene where Hiccup goes into the death-realm a little trippy, surreal and whatnot. Did it work? Was it just weird? It was supposed to be a little free-flowy and disjointed.

Thanks for all the reviews! I didn't mean for some parts to be that scary, but I like that some people thought it was. I'm a fan of horror - wait, let me clarify, I'm a fan of good horror. I apologize if the journey to Death's door was a bit rushed for some people, it was supposed to symbolize that Hiccup's strength is all internal instead of physical. Brains over brawn!

Chapter 13: Talking to the Dead

Somewhere, southeast of Berk -

The clouds thinned the farther south Esol flew. They thinned, but multiplied. She was flying near blind through dense fog. She occasionally glanced Stormfly below the clouds but the dark metallic waters were violent. Stray drops of freezing water slapped against her face. Her fingers were cold and she could barely feel the saddle beneath them.

She must be almost there. She had to be. Days of travel, sleeping on the cold ground, sometimes in the rain, eating fish cooked over a dragon's fire—this hadn't been easy.

Stormfly gave a chime, and Esol squinted into the distance. Barely-there lights were like blinking pinpricks in-between the black clouds.

"That's got to be it!" Esol whispered to Stormfly. She chirped, wanting to get out of this nasty weather as much as she did.

Fisherman's Port was a bustling port city. Nestled on the beaches of a large island the coastal village was ripe with activity from dawn to dusk. Ships came with cargo, traded in the market, and left with new cargo. Anything could be bought or sold in Fisherman's Port, to the right buyer.

The first time Esol had come to Fisherman's Port her father had kept her safely out of the market. It was no a place for ladies to wander, he's said. To many scoundrels, he'd said. Esol was free now. She could walk down any street she choose, speak to any one she wished. Her overprotective father couldn't horde in in a closet like a stone to highly valued to be seen.

There was a grove where she could land and hid Stormfly. She knew it well, it was the place where she and Chuck had gone to get away from everyone else. They'd only had that one afternoon together but it had been enough. As they flew over the village, all lit up below them, Esol felt timid for the first time since leaving Berk.

What if he was different? What if he'd changed? What if he hadn't been serious when he talked about running away together? What if it had all been a game to him? What if this was all a mistake?

That was the question she'd been fighting over since she'd flown away from everything she'd known. She'd dove headfirst into the unknown. What if this entire plan was for nothing? She couldn't just go back to her father and expect forgiveness. No, by now her funeral plans were set and she was being mourned. Could she go back to Berk? Would they understand?

Esol shook these thought from her as Stormfly landed into shaded grove. The trees were thick and the brush was high. She could nestle down for a bit while Esol tried to remember the way to Chuck's house. He lived in a small fisherman's cove, where many of the town's fisherman lived in little huts of sticks and hide.

The rain had left the town deserted. It was late, past midnight at least, and the huts were black inside. No one would see a strange girl sneaking through the fisherman's cove. She was covered in mud when she reached the wood's end. The huts jutted upward like giant anthills.

They all looked the same. She began to walk through them, desperation seeping in. Which one was it? Had he moved? Did he still look the same?

Esol came to the hut she remembered as being his. She could look inside without anyone known, the doors were only fur curtains. She took several deep breaths and reached her hand out to the curtain. She pulled it aside just enough to see inside. There were several lumps inside the tiny hut. They were huddled together on the far side away from the leaky door. Esol scanned them, looking for anything that might give Chuck's identity away.

One lump was his father, Esol recognized him. His hair was black and gray, a memorable scar ran down his cheek. His mother, his brother, someone she didn't know, and Chuck. His short hair was the same color of his father's, night-sea black. Esol wanted to wake him but didn't know how. She was overcome with a happiness she couldn't express without waking them all up. She swallowed her shouts of joy and crammed her exuberant exclamations into a few short fist-pumps in the small space.

Recovering her composure, Esol tiptoed to Chuck's side and gently padded his head with her hand. No response. She reached for his cheek, stroking it, but he didn't so much as flicker an eyelid. She gave him a gentle nudge, then another, and then another. He slept like a rock. She padded his cheek a little harder, gaining a small victory in the form of a nostril twitch. She repeated the action again until his black eyes started to flutter.

At first he was drowsy, just waking up from sleep, and then confused and angry. He looked around, his mouth ready to hoist complaints, and then he saw who'd woken him. His mouth gapped open and he sat up, gripping her shoulders in his strong hands. He looked to his sleeping family and silently screamed. His calloused hands ran through her soaked hair.

Chuck snuggled out of his tightly wound sleeping sack and followed Esol out into the rain. Once outside in the dark she scooped her up and swung her around, laughing all the while. The rain muted much of it.

"Esol! Whatâ€¦.how didâ€¦I meanâ€¦what?" Chuck sputtered and danced around her, holding onto her hands like he thought her a dream.

"I will tell you all about it, but not here." Esol said, putting a finger to her lips. The rain was much quiet in the grove. She pointed toward it, leading the way, never letting go of it hand.

Esol didn't spot until they'd reached Stormfly's resting place. The dragon chirped and tilted her head to see them, and upon seeing Chuck let out a defensive chime.

"What is-?!" Chuck said, letting go of Esol and taking a defensive stand, ready to fight the dragon with his bare hands if he had to.

"No! No, wait, stop." Esol said, jumping between him and Stormfly and holding her hands out to each one. "Chuck, this is Stormfly. She is how I got here."

"What?" Chuck asked, looking at her as though she were crazy. "Youâ€¦flew?"

"Yes. On a dragon." Esol nodded. "I've got so much to tell you!"

"Please, tell away." Chuck said.

He followed Esol's direction to sit down beside Stormfly. The dragon wasn't too keen about him, but Esol assured him that she would in time. Esol started by telling the story of her father's attempts to marry her off and his obnoxious standards. When she got to the part about the island of Berk, Chuck's face lit up.

"That's a real place?" Chuck asked like an enthused child. "I've heard the stories they tell down at the tavern, about dragons and stuff, but I never thought they were true. Are they?"

"Yes." Esol said. "I've met the so called 'dragon master'. His name is Hiccup and he's a great guy. My dad tried to set me up with him."

"Not your type?" Chuck said, motioning to himself with that grin on his face.

"No." Esol laughed. "And, fortunately, he was already in love with someone else."

"Oh?" Chuck said. He couldn't stop looking at her.

Esol laughed, incapable of holding her happiness in any longer. "But, they do train dragons, and ride them, which is where I borrowed her from." Esol patted Stormfly gratefully. "And I've got an idea. Since we can go anywhere, faster than any ship can, we can run away. Together."

"Run away together?" Chuck asked.

"Yes!"

Chuck laughed, and ran a hand over his face and threw his wet hair. "You got my last letter then?"

"Yes." Esol said, feeling a deflation in her balloon.

"Then you know what incredible timing you have?" Chuck smiled.

"What?"

"My parents went and found some girl, a market boon's daughter, and want me to marry her. Her parents and my parents planned the whole thing before they even told us. I've met her once over a awkward breakfast. I don't like her and she doesn't like me. But, that's how it is anymore, according to my father. We men marry for babies and children, not for love and happiness." Chuck said, imitating his father's nasally voice.

"And I have good timing becauseâ€¦?" Esol asked.

"Because the wedding was tomorrow at dawn." Chuck said like it was yesterday's news.

Esol laughed.

"Exactly." Chuck said. "So, where do you want to go? I know this great little village I went to when I was little. It's a great place to live."

Esol looked wide-eyed at him. "So you'll come with me?"

"Of course. I told you I didn't like this girl. She doesn't like me either. She's a little snobby and right all the time."

Esol threw herself at him, tightening her arms around his neck in graceful sobs. She laughed between them, near an emotional wreck. Chuck even loped her in his arms, laughing at the strange sounds she made.

"When do we leave?" Chuck asked.

"Do you need to get anything?" Esol asked, enthusiasm shining.

"Nah. I've got all I need." Chuck smiled and squeezed her tight. She laughed.

"Then as soon as possible." Esol said. The rainy weather was great camouflage. "Wait, you should leave a note."

"Why?"

"So everyone knows that you're not coming back."

"Isn't that implied?"

"Well, they might think you just went for a walk or something. A note will tell them that you're not coming back and that you're okay." Esol explained.

"They'll just be more mad if they know I'm alive and deserting." Chuck shrugged. "I'd rather them think me lost and dead."

"Please, just leave them a note." Esol said. In the end she won out and Chuck went back to the fisherman's cove to leave a soggy note for his family to wake up to. Within an hour he was back at the grove with a small sack.

"I thought you had all you needed?" Esol laughed.

"Since I went back anyway I grabbed a few things." Chuck said. "Like a blanket? Or flint?"

"I've got a dragon." Esol said.

"Right." Chuck shook his head. He slung the bag over his shoulder. "Soâ€¦how does this work?"

Esol showed him how to mount the saddle. He held on tight, and gasped when Stormfly stretched her wings out to take off. With the first push off the ground he shouted, and Esol laughed. She'd been frightened to the first time she'd flown. It is unlike anything else, but wonderful.

The port town was vanishing quickly beneath them. The rain hit their faces and soaked them through. When the rain let up and the island was gone from their sights, Chuck eased his tense grip of her waist.

"So where is this island of yours?" Esol asked. She pointed to the compass.

"It's due south, three days by boat, then hang to the west for two days." Chuck instructed.

"We'll be there in one and a half." Esol said confidently.

Stormfly chirped in agreement, or at least that's how Esol interrupted it. They filled in the time with stories they'd left out of their secret letters.

Back on Berk -

Hiccup was nearly dry. He felt his boot but it was still a little damp. He'd wait just a little longer, besides, his foot was warm by the fire.

"Those are our only options?" Astrid asked at last.

She'd been in a silence for the past few moments after Hiccup had recounted his encounter with Death.

"Yeah." Hiccup said. "Slavery or a task. Your choice."

Astrid sighed. "How can ten thousand years of slavery be equal to finding a single man?"

"I've been thinking about that too." Hiccup said. "I thinkâ€¦that because this man had already eluded Death for so long, that finding him won't be easy."

"If Death can't find him then how can we?" Astrid asked, a flicker of something Hiccup couldn't identify in her blue eyes.

"I don't know. But, we should at least try, even if we fail." Hiccup said.

"You're right." Astrid agreed. She nodded, clasped her hands together. She opened her mouth but closed it again.

"Is there something you want to say?" Hiccup asked, trying to look her in the eye but she avoid his. "Astrid? What's wrong?"

She sighed. "Hiccup, I think I might be able to talk to the dead. They might know where this man is." It was a reluctant confession. She fidgeted her fingers and looked steadily on a spot in the fire.

"Really?" Hiccup asked. "Talk to the dead?"

"They can find me, so they might be able to find him. You know, haunt him in the same way they do me." Astrid said.

"No, I don't think that's a good idea." Hiccup said. He remembered the last time she encountered the dead. It was horrible.

"Hiccup, I want to at least try." Astrid said, looking from the fire and at him. Her eyes were wide. She knew it was a terrifying prospect. But she was fearless, and she would face those fears if it meant getting rid of them.

"Okay. How?" Hiccup asked.

"I don't really know. They usually come to me." Astrid shrugged. "But, I'll wait until nightfall. They are more active then."

Hiccup was dreading nightfall. He told Astrid he would be waiting, ready to jump in at any time. He was worried about her which worried her. She hated to see him so anxious and nervous.

"Do you think the cave would be a good place?" Hiccup asked.

"Yes, I do." Astrid answered. She had been planning on just waiting outside his house, but the cave sounded more secluded. She didn't want the villagers to see her and assume she was talking to demons or something.

Hiccup flinched at her answer. He'd had only been talking. He didn't actually want to go back to the cave but knew there was no taking it back now. They climbed onto the Toothless who seemed as resistant as Hiccup was to go back to the tiny dark space way up in the mountains.

They took a refreshing lap around the island while the sun sank. As the last few sun streaks faded from the ocean Hiccup guided Toothless into the dark crevasse. The air was cold and whipped passed. When Toothless came to a stop and landed, the room was completely black.

"Toothless, give us some light." Hiccup said. A blue-white plasma blast erupted from the dragon's mouth and shot to the other side where it lingered for a few moments before burning out. That light was enough for Hiccup to retrieve a torch from the saddlebags. Toothless lit it and the entire room was bathed in dull fire light.

Astrid took a few steps into the room and waited. They were there, just on the edge of her vision. It was like they were waiting too, for the chance, the right window to jump though. Unsure of how to

proceed, Astrid sat down. They were stirring.

"I need your help." Astrid said to them. A few were watching her like hungry dragons circling a fish barrel. "I need to find someone."

She made eye contact with one who had been coming in and out of her view. Blackened eyes were wide, staring at her, black-white hands edging toward her but then pushing back.

Astrid realized then, that she knew nothing about the man she was supposed to be finding. Not his name, his face, his hair color, nothing. She almost turned to Hiccup to ask when one of them stumbled forward.

"Are you coming home?"

"No, not yet." Astrid said. "I need to find someone first."

"Home." After the first one came forward a multiple began to spill like thick oil.

"I'm looking for a man whose escaped death for five hundred years." Astrid said, hoping for anything.

"Home." "I can't see." "Mother?" "Gone." "Don't go." "Will you stay?"

Their mutters were horrible on the ears, a hundred terrified and dying voices crying out in a last breath attempt to live. Astrid felt the air being sucked out of her lungs.

"He is gone. Not here." a childish voice seeped through.

"He's gone?" Astrid asked, fishing for anything.

"He's a horrible man." another cried. The initial voices faded but were replaced with a brigade of wails and howls.

"He is a cheater." "Liar." "Scoundrel." "Not worthy to rot in hell."

Such hate and anger was suffocating. They were lashing out with gnarled teeth and jagged nails.

"Please, help me find me." Astrid said. "Death wants him back."

This only enraged the dark spirits. They tangled together like water, clawing and pushing their way.

"I know that man." one voice came over the others. A feminine face push forward, once attractive but wrought with death. A gapping hole in her chest stained her with black blood. "He has wronged many people, cheated men and scorned women. Stolen, misled, and countless other misdeeds."

"I need to find him." Astrid said, almost pleading.

"There are many who are eager to see him chained by death." this female spirit said.

With those words a chorus spat behind her, "in the lowest pit of hell" "consumed by ice-fire" "soaked in vengeful blood" "drowned in lye" "skinned and oiled and cooked".

"Many have had more than a lifetime to mull of what horrible fate their tormentor would suffer." the female spirit said. "With five hundred years, he had stacked a number of enemies on the other side. That is why he hides."

"Will you help me find him and send him where he belongs?" Astrid asked. There was a murmur among the spirits, as if they were one being debating internally, hundreds of voices tossing out theirs.

"We will." the female spirit said. "But I already know where he is."

"Where?" Astrid said.

"A bar in a dirty town where he steals innocence from lost girls and secrets from the drunken, and sells them the same." she said. "He will know who you are and why you've come at first glance. It is a pirate town, to the southeast, on a rock shaped like a axe."

"Thank you." Astrid said.

"Anything to make him pay for this earthly crimes." she said with a sliver of malice.

Astrid stood up as the shadows began to fall back. They did not dissipate, but it was as if they were anticipating revenge. She turned and stepped toward the entrance where Toothless and Hiccup were waiting. Toothless was glaring around the cave, his yellow eyes narrowed at the corners. Hiccup had a hand on his dragon, the other holding the torch. His green eyes were wide and his mouth was open, waiting for her response.

"I know where he is." Astrid said.

"Great!" Hiccup said. "Tell me everything once we're out of this cave."

As soon as the cavern was behind them and the wind was whipping, Astrid began to relay what she'd learned.

"An island shaped like an axe?" Hiccup repeated.

"Do you know it?" Astrid asked.

"No, but how hard could it be to find?" Hiccup shrugged. "We'll wait until morning and leave before the sun comes up. We don't want any more attention that we need."

"What about your dad?"

"We'll have to tell him. We might be gone for awhile." Hiccup sighed.

Toothless landed right in Hiccup's room. The night was young and if they were leaving before sunrise they had better sleep now. Toothless

curled into his stone bed, as if he knew that the following day would be tiring.

Stoick was downstairs. Hiccup inhaled and looked at Astrid for reassurance.

"I'm right behind you." Astrid nodded. Hiccup took the first step and Astrid followed him.

Stoick looked up from the fire, and sighed at the look on Hiccup's face. He was about as good as his father when it came to difficult conversations.

I'm sorry about the delay in updates - it's the end of the semester and I've got a lot of hours still left to get in at my internship, and I've been editing a story that I need to start submitting places, and my sister is getting married - so I've got a lot of stuff happening all at once.

14. Chapter 14: Unintentional Rendezvous

Alright, chapter fourteen! Intentionally, I wanted to get this story done before the movie came out because let's face it - the weekend it premieres I'm not getting anything productive done. Or it could be the opposite and I could be so pumped up that I'll get a ton done. Who knows?

Anyway - onward!

Chapter 14: Unexpected Rendezvous

The eastern horizon was still dark blue when Hiccup and Astrid slipped out the front door. The village was still snoozing and would be until dawn when the Terrible Terrors started stirring. Toothless bounded ahead of them and bounced around them. His pink tongue lolling out of his eager mouth as he pranced.

Hiccup padded the dragon's nose with the intention of calming him.

"Toothless's saddle bags are packed." Hiccup said. He'd added a few more to hold enough supplies for a multiple day trip. They'd never been gone so long before but Toothless didn't seem to mind the extra baggage. "Are you ready, bud?"

Toothless jumped and on the return trip to earth stilled and knelt slightly for boarding.

"Are you ready?" Hiccup asked Astrid. She'd been quiet this morning.

"Yeah." Astrid nodded.

Hiccup stepped beside Toothless and held his hand out and slightly bent forward, "Milady."

Astrid gave a short good-humored humph but slid her hand into his. She climbed up and situated herself comfortably on the saddle. Hiccup climbed up after and connected his prosthetic into Toothless's tail

harness with a metallic click. Astrid lazily slipped her arms around his waist and laced her fingers together over his stomach.

Hiccup opened his mouth to give Toothless the all clear when a voice from his house stopped him. Stoick had opened the door Hiccup had been so careful to close quietly.

"You're leaving?" Stoick asked, his arms at his sides and his helmet at a slight angle, like he'd hurried to meet them.

"Yeah, but we'll be back." Hiccup said. Toothless turned so Hiccup was facing his father. "In a few days, maybe."

"And where is it you're headed?" Stoick asked in his chiefly tone.

Hiccup inhaled opened mouthed, but didn't have anything to say. They'd told him only the night before that they were leaving on an expedition to find a man that couldn't be found, on an island they didn't know. Stoick had been less than enthused. He replayed his sigh, same as the night before, as if it would somehow change their minds. When it didn't, he shifted his stance and shook his head.

"And you weren't going to say goodbye?" Stoick asked.

"Uhâ€¦" Hiccup started but couldn't find the words.

"We didn't want to wake you." Astrid piped up behind him. She was always better with words at these particular moments.

"I see." Stoick said. He looked toward the still starry blue. "You don't want anyone following you. Alright, just be careful."

"I will, Dad." Hiccup said. Stoick was hesitating. Hiccup didn't enjoy these awkward father-son moments and neither did his father. "I promise."

"Hiccup, all theseâ€¦dark dealings, they're not right, son." Stoick said. He was switching his weight between feet. "And Iâ€¦be careful, Hiccup. You're the only son that I have."

"We'll be back, Dad." Hiccup said. He felt Astrid nudge him in the back. "I promise, I'll be careful. Don't worry."

Toothless took the initiative and pushed himself and his two riders into the early morning air. The very dimmest glow was peeking through the eastern clouds. As it grew brighter, Berk grew smaller. When the sun yawned and spilt its gold onto the waters Berk had vanished behind them.

"Hiccup, are you alright?" Astrid asked after the night had left in silence.

"Yeah." Hiccup answered shortly.

"You don't sound alright." Astrid said in his ear. "Is it your dad?"

Hiccup sighed. It was.

"Hiccup, he just worries about you." Astrid said in that motherly tone that was like warm yak butter. "He might be chief, but he's also your father. He loves you and doesn't want to see you in danger."

"I know." Hiccup said. He sighed again. He didn't know how to explain it. She always had words to put to thoughts and he never did. He couldn't put words to what he was feeling and didn't really want to. "It's justâ€¦"

"Just what?" Astrid asked. She wasn't nagging him, but her voice was warm and encouraging, like no matter what he said next she would understand.

Hiccup lifted one hand from Toothless and covered hers.

"It's just that we don't talk about stuff like that unless one of us has a good chance of dying or something." Hiccup shrugged. It was true. "And we justâ€¦we don'tâ€¦we're bad at it and it's weird."

"I didn't think guys talked about feelings with other guys." Astrid said.

"Did your Uncle Finn talk about his feelings?" Hiccup asked.

"Noâ€¦not really." Astrid said. "But he did talk about stuff like that with Ingrid. If something was bothering one of them they'd talk it out. He didn't talk about it to me. I suppose that'sâ€¦a wife's job."

She said the last few words quietly, after a pause.

"I know." Hiccup said just as quiet. This trip wasn't off to a good start. He didn't want to continue on the subject of his absence mother, but didn't know how to change it. "It's just how it's always been, you know?"

"Yeah." Astrid said, warm and sweet. She reached and kissed him on the cheek. "Thankfully, you won't have to worry about that."

Hiccup felt that balloon in his chest expand. She did it again. She turned something negative into something positive. Hiccup hugged her hands with his and felt the warmth pass through them into his. It was the reminder that the rest of his years could be spent with Astrid that enveloped the darker feelings that surrounded the thoughts of his mother.

"Thank you." Hiccup said as she settled in closer.

That night Hiccup and Astrid made camp on a small rocky island. After a dinner of local fish they retreated into a natural cavern. Toothless made building a fire easy and the three of them slept beside a roaring blaze in its hearth mimicking warmth. Hiccup slept soundly with one arm draped over the girl beside him, who was finding it harder to sleep.

Even with a blanket underneath them the cavern floor was hard. The natural sounds of the cavern were echoing off its walls, dripping water and the flutter of small creatures. And in addition, there were

the inextinguishable unnatural sounds.

Ever since Astrid had told them that she would find this man the spirits had been utterly restless, even for them. They whispered to her, to themselves, of the terrible things this one man had done. It was a relief to not have them nipping at her ankles but it was like trying to sleep in a tavern during a holiday dinner.

Some of the spirits were talking with great pride in their stories, others with a malicious distaste. They were all excited about finally getting their revenge on this man that they couldn't stop. Astrid never knew the dead to be soâ€|chatty.

After what felt much longer than it was, Astrid snaked her way out of Hiccup's hold. He stirred, his green eyes fluttered open a bit, but Astrid patted his hand that had reached out beside him.

"Go back to sleep." Astrid whispered to him.

"Wherewouldyougoing?" Hiccup mumbled.

"I have lady business. I'll be right back." Astrid whispered back.

Hiccup looked confused for a brief moment but comprehension eased in. He slipped easily back into sleep. Astrid tiptoes from the cave and put a figure to her lips when Toothless gave her a weary gaze.

She did not have to go, but she didn't want Hiccup to follow her. She sat down on the rocks a little ways from the cavern's entrance. The fire inside was a dim glow, but a light to guide her back if necessary.

The dead followed her like a shadow that wasn't dependent on light. The talk didn't carry on the wind or echo off the rocks. It wasn't effected by the crashing and surging pull of the ocean. It was like a constant whisper in her ear, of someone of a million voices blowing them so low straight into her head that no one else could hear.

A particularly nasty story was being told. Torture, betrayal, and all with sickening details. Astrid groaned and put her head into her hands.

"Forgive them." Said the woman who had told her about the man. She emerged from the lingering darkness and sat beside Astrid. "They have had little to rejoice for."

"How could one man be soâ€|horrible?" Astrid asked. If he was so terrible, why hadn't someone else taken him out? Surely he would have made enemies.

"That I do not know." She said. "How could any one person be anything that they are?"

"Butâ€|what if all this is for nothing? What we fail and we don't get him?" Astrid asked. It had been in the back of her mind but she didn't want to voice these thoughts to Hiccup. He had enough to think about.

"It would not be the first time." She said.

Astrid lifted her head from her hands to look at her. The ghostly woman sighed, and nodded.

"You are not the first to be given such a task. Death is adamant, and will give anyone that wants a trade the option of finding the one that eludes him."

"It is that hard?" Astrid asked.

The ghostly woman sighed again. Astrid had never had the chance to actually look at her because she was always half in shadow, and because Astrid never tried to look the dead in the eye. But this woman was, as much as she could be for being dead, beautiful.

She was young and had a cultured poise about her fine features. Dark hair flowed around her blue-white feminine face. Her voice was soft and rich, motherly and comforting, with a generous compassion that exhumed from her very presence.

"This man you are searching for us used to being hunted by spirits." She said. "Not unlike you, in some ways. Are you as afraid of us now as you were when you first saw us?"

Astrid paused. "No."

The woman nodded. "He has become used to us as well. He used us to his advantage. A truly nasty piece of work, yes, but also clever and smart. Heâ€¦isn't human anymore but has twisted into something horrid, shedding his mortal shell to become like us, inhuman. And in the process lost all that makes him human."

"What does that mean?" Astrid whispered.

"He has been eaten away, by hate, despair, agony, and rage. He has let the darkness that resides within take hold and consume him." She said darkly.

"Could that happen to me?" Astrid whispered.

"It could happen to anyone, and does from time to time. History is filled with those who let their hatred rule them, or their fear. But, from what I have seen there is too much love in your life for you to lose yourself and he has." With those words she sighed deeply. "He too held love, once. It was when that love was lost that hatred began to worm into his very being, his soul."

Astrid paused before she said, "You know a lot about this man. You don't hate him as much as the others."

"I suppose I do not." she said. "I will stop you before you ask. It is not because I do not harbor anger for him. I have seen what hate and anger can do and I wish to keep my mind as long as I can."

Astrid breathed in the chilly sea air. The moisture was comforting in her lungs and nose, like a blanket. How strange it was, indeed, to be sitting out here talking with a spirit.

"I cannot tell you how refreshing it is to speak to someone other

than the dead." she said. "It has been so long and I have seen so many ebb away, slowly decaying so that nothing remains but a shell."

"How long have you been dead?" Astrid said. It sounded rude when she heard the words smack into the air but the woman didn't seem to mind.

She smiled, not in humor but in a learned force against the stark reality. "It is hard to say now. Several hundred years I'd expect."

"Can I ask something?" Astrid said, unsure of how to proceed.

"You have been, haven't you?" the woman smiled. There was something motherly about her that reminded Astrid of Ingrid. She was willing to listen and to speak, and offer the best advice she could.

"Can you speak to anyone who's dead?" Astrid asked. "Anyone who's died?"

"I suppose." She said. She looked at Astrid like she already knew the next question. "You want me to deliver a message to someone you've lost?"

"Not me." Astrid said. Her eyes flicked toward the cavern where a fire glow could just be seen on the outlying rocks.

"Ah." the woman nodded with a smile. "Someone _he _has lost."

"Yes, his mother." Astrid nodded. "Could you find her?"

"It depends. I can only find her if she still lingers on the rim." She said with doubt in her voice.

"The rim?"

"Oh, yes, you don't know. I have to remind myself that you are not dead, but alive and fleshly." The woman smiled. "When we die, the rim is where we go until death can be accepted and we move on. It's known by many names, the precipice, the edge, in gray in-between."

"What happens when you move on?"

"I don't know. I have never left the rim. I suppose that is the paradise beyond, the afterlife, heaven, Valhalla, or whatever it's called these days." She sighed. She caught Astrid's questioning stare. "I know, I am still here. I linger still on the rim. Why, I am unsure. I know that I am dead, and there is no changing that."

"I thinkâ€¦I remember that place." Astrid said. She started out into the darkness that swarmed with dead faces and whispers. "It was darkâ€¦and lonely. It wasâ€¦like floating."

"You were dead for a time. Time passes differently when you are dead and nothing is ticking your life away." She said.

"Would I have become like you if I'd stayed dead?" Astrid asked. The look of those dead and tormented faces were a nightmare and she shuttered with the thought that that might have been her future.

"I can't say." She shook her head. "Sometimes I wonder if the reason I am still here is because someone else can't let go, like vines in the living world holding me where I am, refusing to accept my death."

"For several hundred years?" Astrid asked. The woman shrugged and avoided her gaze. Astrid gasped as it dawned on her. "Wait, does it have something to do with the man we're after?"

The woman half-smiled. "I was hoping to avoid this conversation if I could, but I should have known it was a matter of time."

"Why?" Astrid asked, turning her body to face her.

"I knew him in life. We wereâ€¦close. But he changed, became somethingâ€¦different, a creature driven by obsession and greed. He was not the man I knew at all. I left, and fell in love with another man, who would become my husband, andâ€¦he lost it." She said, ghost tears welling like diamonds in the corner of her darkened eyes. She was avoiding eye contact with Astrid and turning her head away so that her dark hair sheltered her view.

"He loved you." Astrid said.

"I am afraid so. I believe I loved him once, too." She said with a heartbroken sigh. "Much of what he's done can be attributed to me."

"Could he be keeping you here?" Astrid asked. "Could it be guilt?"

"I don't know." She said. "No one knows what keeps them here."

"You know who he is, though? Where to find him and what he looks like?" Astrid asked eagerly. It was a lead they hadn't had the day before.

"I do know his face." She said. "I will help you, in any way I can. It will be the least I can do for causing such a commotion. But, please, I will give you the information you need when the time comes, but for now, tell me about this woman you want me to find."

Astrid bit her lip and looked toward the cave. She was fearful of what Hiccup would think if he knew.

The morning came with a burst of bright sunlight into the cave. The fire had gone out and Toothless was prancing outside by the water, ready for breakfast. Hiccup rolled to find Astrid sound beside him, a hand clenched in the blanket and pulled toward her mouth. Not wanting to wake her, he tiptoed out of the cave.

Hiccup and Toothless had enough fish for breakfast in no time. With Toothless's help he built a makeshift fire pit and had the fish roasting and nearly done when Astrid wandered out of the cave with sleep still in her eyes.

"Good morning, Milady." Hiccup said, gesturing toward the fire pit. He was sitting around it and held his hand out toward her.

"I'm going to take care of some things." Astrid yawned and pointed off to the side. She disappeared behind some root-covered rocks.

She returned in a few short minutes a bit more awake than before and joined them. They ate while the sun warmed the air and dazzles the clouds. Toothless was ready to take off and as soon as they'd packed up their small camp and put out their fires they were aboard the saddle and shooting off into the sky. The clouds were white and fluffy, the air clear and crisp, the sky blue and bright. It was a perfect day for flying.

More than once Astrid fell asleep on his shoulder. They would be flying, her arms tucked around his waist and chin resting on his shoulder, and she would slacken her grip and lean into him. He never woke her up but she never slept more than a few minutes at a time. She would pulled herself up and pretend as if it didn't happen.

"Didn't sleep very well last night, I take it." Hiccup said, thinking than some conversation might help her stay awake. "Hope I didn't keep you up."

"No." Astrid said. "It wasn't you, Hiccup. It was just one of those nights."

The rest of the day went by like this, with minimal talking and a bit of snoozing. The sun moved across the sky and soon Hiccup was looking for an island for camp. They past several tiny rocks, none big enough for a camp, and after the sun went down he finally saw one that would do. It was canopied by tall trees and cushioned by grass.

Toothless landed and between the three of them camp was up and a fire was roasting dinner in less than a half an hour. The sky was clear overhead and the stars were brilliant. With any luck they wouldn't wake up in the rain.

They collapsed into a tent Hiccup had constructed out of a few sticks which was nothing more than a blanket draped a few feet over another blanket. But it was shelter and a small comfort from the outside. Hiccup fell asleep as easily had be had the night before, with Astrid resting in his arms.

Astrid was considerably exhausted. Hiccup's heartbeat against her cheek was soothing and sleep was much easier to come by tonight, even through the constant murmurs and whispers. She slept soundly but was prodded awake just before dawn by a sudden outburst of energy.

The spirits were in an uproar, hollering and screaming in anger like she'd never seen. They were holding nothing back. Dead faces were twisted in disgust. Astrid pulled herself from Hiccup's grip and slipped outside the tent.

"What happened?" Astrid whispered as she put distance between her and Hiccup.

"Someone else has joined us." the woman was quick by Astrid, her face distraught and depressed. "Caused by the man you seek."

Astrid squinted into the darkness and saw a fresh face among the squirming. Young, confused, and derelict.

"What did he do?" Astrid asked quietly. She didn't want them all screaming their stories at her again.

"Nothing he hasn't done a thousand times before." the woman sighed. "That poor young thing ran away from home, looking for a new beginning, and stumbled into his sights. He promised her the world, like he does to the lost young ones, and charms them into his bed. He pushes them into prostitution, more or less, and makes it so they cannot leave him. A horrible man, he is. Treats women with less respect than human waste."

There was a distaste on her tone but Astrid didn't ask about it. She peered back on the recently dead young woman, who looked no older than Astrid. This man she was searching for hated women and treated them as such. What was she walking into?

"But you are smarter than the women that fall into his tricks." the woman whispered as if reading her worries. She nodded back to the makeshift tent where Hiccup lightly snored. "You have anchors holding you down."

"I've got anchors." Astrid repeated with eyes on the tent.

"Now, about that someone you asked about," the woman said tentatively.

"Yes?" Astrid said eagerly, glad to have something else to talk about.

"I did not find her." She shook her head.

"What?" Astrid asked, her heart sinking a bit.

"That means one of two things. The first is that she has moved on to the other side. The second is that she is alive." The woman said. "Before you speak, I did not only search for her but I asked those that can still answer. No one remembers her."

"But, what does that mean?" Astrid asked.

The ghost woman opened her mouth to speak, but a sound from the tent interrupted her. Hiccup was yawning and ducking out of the tent. He spotted Astrid and waved to her.

Astrid smiled and waved back at him, not wanting him to see her talking to no one. She glanced at the woman who nodded at her with a knowing smile.

"What are you doing up so early?" Hiccup asked, oblivious to the darkness that skirted and the woman sitting beside her.

"Oh, just admiring the scenery." Astrid shrugged.

The woman placed an ice-cold hand on Astrid's, which made her jump, and she was sure Hiccup noticed.

"You alright?" Hiccup asked as the woman leaned in to speak.

"What do you think it means?" the woman smiled.

Astrid paused and as Hiccup sat on her other side and cupped her hands in his, her thoughts collided and burst from her before she could stop them. "She's alive!"

The woman smiled as she left the fade into the darkness.

"What?" Hiccup asked. His green eyes were focusing in on hers. His brow was furled and his stare intent.

Suddenly, this revelation felt like a hammer in her chest.

"Um, nothing. Just thinking." Astrid said, but it tasted like a lie and at the moment she cursed herself for being such a terrible liar.

"You were talking to them." Hiccup said, leaning back from her, letting her hands fall out of his.

"No, I wasâ€¦yeah." Astrid sighed.

"Astrid, do you think that's a good idea?" Hiccup asked. He couldn't sit still when he was agitated, or worried. His hands moved furiously as he talked and his entire body was a series of subtle movements. "What if they like, try to drag you off or something?"

"They won't." Astrid assured him. She didn't know if that was even true, but it seemed to help Hiccup relax. "They want this guy chained by death as much as we do. More, I think."

Hiccup sighed. His stomach growled. "Just, be careful, Astrid. I don't want to lose you twice."

"I will." Astrid reached forward and grabbed his hands and stood, bringing him up with her. "Now come on, it's time for breakfast."

The third day of travel went by a little faster than the second. The clouds were a little thicker and heavier, the air a little colder. They flew through a gray cloud and burst through on the other side with a layer of cold moisture on their skin and clothes. Toothless grunted, throwing the droplets from his face and wings with a quick shake.

"My bad." Hiccup said, taking his hand and wiping his face. Astrid nuzzled his neck, but then he realized she was wiping the water on his shirt.

They spent the rest of the day trying to avoid the increasing number of gray clouds. This time Hiccup was looking for island to camp on before the sun began to fall. When he passed one sprouted in the distance he would make a mental note of its location in case they needed to double back.

They didn't need to, though. The sun vanished behind the thick sky and slowly eased down, leaving them in a darkening shade of gray. An island appeared just to the south and Hiccup steered Toothless toward it. It loomed out of the gray mist that was gathering, a nice little island of rocks and trees.

"What is that?" Astrid said, pointing to the island as it grew bigger. There was something moving along its shore, a dragon by the movement.

"I was afraid of running into wild dragons. I'm surprised we haven't yet." Hiccup said. "But don't worry. It's not like dragons aren't something we deal with every day."

"Right." Astrid said in his ear.

The island grew closer and the wild dragon came in and out of view. It was pausing at the edge of the island, preening by the water.

"It's a Nadder." Hiccup said.

"Yeah!" Astrid said, squinting her eyes at the growing dragon. Against the gray sky its coloring was obscured, but to Astrid the colors and markings were unmistakable. She would know that blue and yellow dragon anywhere. "Wait, Hiccup, that's Stormfly!"

Astrid squeezed the air from Hiccup's chest. He coughed and she let go with a laugh. He couldn't help but smile too, he hadn't seen her so genuinely happy in a long while.

"It has to be Esol, or Stormfly is on her way home." Hiccup said. He urged Toothless to fly faster.

They up on the island and Stormfly caught them in her yellow eyes. There was a moment of uncertainty but within a few seconds she chirped recognition. Astrid jumped off Toothless before he landed and rushed to her open winged dragon who welcomed her with a series of chirps and chimes. Toothless chimed in with a sound that to Hiccup sounded as close to laughter as a dragon can get.

"Who's there?"

Astrid and Stormfly paid no attention to the third person emerging from the threes, but Hiccup already knew that voice. He slid off Toothless as Esol came to see what the commotion was about. Her face broke into a bright smile and she clapped as she saw Hiccup and Toothless.

"Oh my gods, I didn't think I've ever actually see you again!" Esol cried.

"Same here." Hiccup said, glad to see she was alive. "Did you make it?"

"Yes!" Esol said. She couldn't stop smiling. "Chuck is here, with me, and we were going to camp here for the night and head back out in the morning. Is this?"

"Astrid." Hiccup said, gesturing to the girl Esol had only thus far been told about. At the mention of her name, Astrid gave them a bit of her attention.

"So it worked?" Esol asked.

"It did, but with a few minor setbacks." Hiccup shrugged.

"Who are you talking to?" a male's voice came from through the trees. A stocky man with a head full of dark hair pushed through the green. There was a worried look on his weathered but handsome face.

"Chuck, this is Hiccup and Astrid." Esol introduced him eager.

"Oh, those guys?" Chuck asked, his worry vanished into curiosity.

"Oh, we have so much to talk about!" Esol exclaimed. "Join us for dinner and we can exchange stories by the fire! I want to hear about it all!"

And there's chapter fourteen! Whoo!

This is the first chapter I've uploaded on this new computer, and I miss the old windows so much. This windows right nonsense is ridiculous. If I wanted unnecessarily complicated I'd have gone for an apple.

Anyway " I've got a tumblr that I use as an outlet for a lot of my dragon madness " sjhodge is the codename or whatever. Look it up if you're board.

p.s. thanks for all the reviews!

Oh, and did anyone thick that the ghost woman was actually Hiccup's mom? I saw that reference when I was in the last chapter and I didn't want to confuse people by hiding her identiy for a prolonged period of time.

15. Chapter 15: An Island Shaped like an Axe

Sometimes it takes me a while to come up with a chapter title but this one just kind of came to me. Weird how that happens.

Chapter 15: An Island Shaped like an Axe

The sun went down and the stars were bright between the heavy gray clouds. They parted here and there and thinned revealing the glittering dots for just a brief moments before smothering in back beneath their gray. Hiccup, Astrid, Esol and Chuck has sat around the campfire sharing their stories of the past few days. The fish were just a pile of little white bones among the increasing ashes.

"It is nice to have someone that I don't have to lie too." Esol sighed. She rubbed her tired face. "There's been so much sneaking, and fibbing, and hiding the last little bit to make me crazy."

"I know what you mean." Hiccup agreed.

Chuck tossed another fish bone into the fire that he'd been playing with. "What was it like to meet death? I mean, was he big and creature-like?"

Esol shot him a quick warning glare, as if to silently shush him, but he wasn't paying attention. Chuck was looking at Hiccup with a gossipy thirst, ready for the next violence filled and gut wrenching

tale.

"Itâ€|uh, it was definitely a trip." hiccup shrugged. It wasn't a part of the past few days he'd like to relive. He glanced at Astrid who returned his stare with an understanding nod. He'd told her more of that journey than anyone else but he'd also left key moments out. He'd given her a vague summary and she hadn't pressed him for more. But this simple answer wasn't enough for Chuck who was still staring at him with a childlike fascination. "I never say his face. I think he had one but he wore this cloak thing. He wasâ€|tall."

"Was he human?" Esol asked, seeming to forget her previous taboo of the subject.

"I think so." Hiccup shrugged. "I mean, he looked human. He had a human-like shape. He was creepy, definitely creepy."

"You would face death for love." Esol sighed in her dreamy voice. Her eyes went starry and stared longingly at the space between them and the grey nothingness above. Sighing again, "That is so romantic."

Chuck repositioned his arm that he was leaning on and pushed the dirt around with his foot. Hiccup and Astrid shared a quick glance and Hiccup felt a surge of blush in his cheeks. With any luck the firelight would hid it. He adjusted his legs. They were poking around in that weird part his chest that made him feel jittery and a bit sweaty. He'd be a lot more comfortably if it was just Astrid. Her presence was easy and calming.

Chuck coughed into his hand and sat up. "It's late."

"You're right." Esol added. "And we've all got a long day ahead."

"We found a cave not too far from here." Chuck nodded to his left. "It's a lot dryer than sleeping outside."

"Especially if it rains." Esol nodded.

The cave was a short walk and large enough for the four of them and two dragons. As Chuck built a fire, with help from Toothless, thunder crashed outside. Camp was built around the warm fire as the rain began to drizzle, illuminated by dazzling flashes of lightening. The dragons stood in the cave's mouth as the rain surged into a thick grey curtain.

They laughed about their timing and settled in for the night on either side of the fire. Chuck fell asleep and slept like a rock, a loud rock. Astrid and Hiccup were still awake and trying to be quiet.

"He's louder than Hookfang." Astrid whisper-laughed.

Hiccup smiled. Ever since they'd discovered that a Monstrous Nightmare's snore could shake an entire house they hadn't let Snotlout forget it.

"We might sleep better in the rain." Hiccup joked. Of course, he wasn't sleeping outside if he could help it and he knew she wouldn't

either. "What do you think about them?"

"They're adorable." Astrid whispered. Lying this close he could feel her warm breath on his lips. "I like them."

Thunder shook the whole island. Astrid swallowed a yawn and inched closer to Hiccup. He welcomed her in his arms as lightening flashed in the cave's mouth. Toothless sighed in his sleep, exhaling hot breath on Hiccup's other side. He could get used to nights like these. Toothless on one side and Astrid on the other; it was a perfect night. Everything in that very moment was perfect.

The morning came with a pitter-patter of residual rain. Hiccup woke to a numbed arm and for a moment was startled. Astrid had taken hold of his hand and rolled over in her sleep, tucking his arm underneath her. He tried to wiggle it loose but there was no way to do it without waking her up.

He risked it and she started to stir. Hiccup held his breath and kept his arm still but it was too late. Astrid inhaled as she rolled back over to face him. Even in the morning she was beautiful. Her hair was a messy halo around her head. Her cream skin was relaxed and supple. Her crystal eyes were bright and warm.

"Hey." Astrid whispered.

"Hey." Hiccup felt the blood surged back through his elbow and into his hand, tingling in his fingers.

"Sleep better tonight?" Hiccup asked.

Astrid nodded and she stretched her back.

"You two finally awake?" Esol asked with a laugh on her voice. She was standing in the cave's mouth with rain-spotted hair. She was holding a hand over her eyes to shield them from stray drops.

Hiccup and Astrid pulled themselves from the blanket and stretched out what cricks and cramps that a hard night on a stone floor brings.

"We would have woken you up sooner but you were so cute." Esol smiled.

Toothless and Stormfly were prancing around the seaside where Chuck was orchestrating their breakfast. The night storm had left the morning gray and dreary but surprisingly bright. Esol was stroking a fire they'd built over the remains of the previous night's.

Hiccup and Astrid struck the small camp inside the cave and joined Esol at the fire as Chuck brought in the catch.

"I can't believe how much easier life is with dragons." Chuck said. He pointed back to the beach where the dragons were eating their fill of fish. "This same catch would take a boat of guys a whole day."

"And we have Hiccup to thank for that." Astrid said with a nudge in his direction. Hiccup felt the bashful heat return to his face.

"So those stories are true?" Chuck asked. "Everyone's heard the story of how the dragon master from Berk took down the queen dragon. It's quite the tavern tale."

"So I've heard." Hiccup scratched his head. Were there really people all over talking about him? It was such a weird and embarrassing feeling, like an invasion of privacy. "But 'master' is a pretty strong word."

The fish roasted over the fire while spare droplets of rain slipped through the clouds. They landed on the fire and exploded into a tiny burst of steam. Hiccup answered the questions he could about dragons, and at their request, retold his side of the famous dragon battle. Esol and Chuck were listening intently and every once in a while Astrid would add detail or commentary.

All too soon the fish was eaten and the day was ripe for travel and dwindling away. They put out the fire and packed up and Astrid went to Stormfly and gingerly touched her nose. Stormfly chirped, like she knew this was another goodbye, and nuzzled Astrid with the affection of a heartbroken dragon.

"Don't worry, girl. We'll see each other again." Astrid soothed, her face lacking the confidence she spoke with. Stormfly chirped again in her arms.

"She is a great dragon." Esol said, stepping up beside Astrid.

"Yeah." Astrid said.

"I am glad we met, Astrid. I wanted to meet the girl that Hiccup would dive into hell for." Esol said. She smiled as she whispered, "He must love you a lot."

Astrid smiled as she let Stormfly go and dropped her hands by her sides. Stormfly was reluctant to leave her. She glanced over her shoulder where Hiccup and telling an enthusiastic Chuck about the mysterious and rare Night Fury.

"Yeah, he's pretty amazing." Astrid sighed.

"I promise to send letter with Trader Johan when we are settled." Esol said with a nod. She reached out and took Astrid by the hands. "And when you receive that first letter you have to write back. I want to know everything. Hiccup isn't always the best with words, but I think you already knew that."

Astrid smiled, holding in a laugh. "Yeah, I have. And I will."

"Promise." Esol insisted.

"I promise I'll write." Astrid said, returning Esol's hand squeeze.

Stormfly chimed between them, shaking her wings and nuzzling Astrid.

"Don't worry, girl. You're in good hands." Astrid patted her,

returning the genuine affection.

"Alright, let's get going. Daylight is burning." Chuck said, throwing a hand in the air toward Stormfly.

"Have a safe journey." Hiccup called as Esol climbed up on Stormfly's saddle. Chuck climbed up after her. He still looked a little wary of sitting atop a dragon.

"You too." Esol waved with a smile. Stormfly bounded into the gray air and with one last look at Astrid she took her two riders out into the southern distance.

Hiccup mounted Toothless, but Astrid lingered.

"You alright?" Hiccup asked.

"It's weird watching her fly away like that." Astrid sighed. Stormfly was growing smaller and smaller.

"She'll come back." Hiccup assured her. Toothless walked up behind Astrid and nosed her.

Astrid smiled and returned the favor and patted his nose gently. He bounced around so that she was standing beside him in prime position to climb onto the saddle. She sighed, and climbed up and settled comfortably behind Hiccup. She slid her arms around him and held on a little tighter.

Toothless took off and bounded through the low lying clouds. He soared with all the infamous fury of his breed. Astrid turned to watch the little flapping dot that was Stormfly wane into the misty gray.

The day went by as gray and dreary as it had started. The wind blasted by cold as ice. Astrid tucked her face into Hiccup's shoulder and neck to protect it from the stinging cold. She knew Hiccup's had to be near unbearable. His knuckles were almost numb and she rubbed them together against his stomach.

Hiccup's frozen hand settled on top of hers.

"Your hands are freezing!" Astrid said into his neck. He'd get sick if they stayed like this. But what to do? Hiccup was the only one that could ride Toothless with his trail fixture.

"My everything is freezing." Hiccup said. By the sound of his voice he was trying not to suck in the frozen air. "When we get back to Berk I'm going to invest in some kind of wind shield or a mask. I can't feel my face."

"A flying mask?" Astrid asked.

"Sure, why not?" Hiccup shrugged. "You know, some sturdy leather would stop that breeze."

"You'll look ridiculous." Astrid half-laughed at the idea. She tried to picture him with a leather mask but he looked insane.

"I'd rather look ridiculous than be frozen." Hiccup said. He switched

his hands between Astrid's and Toothless. His hand had been warming up, and keeping hers warm, but this new hand was absolutely frozen. It sent a chill through her hand and down her spine.

"You'll start with a mask and then you won't be able to stop." Astrid said.

"What?"

"You have the tendency to go overboard, babe." Astrid half-laughed. She admired his unstoppable passion and determination. "Especially when it comes to dragons. You'll start with a mask and then end up in a head to toe leather body suit."

Hiccup started to say something but then stopped mid-word. "What did you call me?"

"Hmm?"

"Just now." Hiccup said.

"Oh, 'babe'?" Astrid asked. She hadn't done with intention. It kind of spilled out. "Does that bother you?"

"No." Hiccup said quickly. "Not at all. Babe."

Astrid smiled and sucked in the laugh that almost escaped. That was the first time anyone had called her that and not gotten a bloody nose. It had felt so rude before, like a dehumanizing insult, but when she thought about Hiccup, it fit. He was her babe, and she was his.

She snuggled in as close to him as she could. It was cold and there was not changing that right away, but next to him it was just as warm as it needed to be. Together like this the cold day whisked by and soon was in its second half. The sun was falling behind the thickening clouds.

The daylight was yawning to a close and the weather was threatening with distance lightening. Thunder rolled behind them like a chasing beast.

"We've got to land before the storm catches up to us." Hiccup said. "Toothless is fast but he's not that fast."

"Hiccup, down there, straight ahead. What is that?" Astrid asked. She didn't want to lose the warmth she's secured in her hands. But she didn't have to. "Wait, is that?"

A vicious rock formation clawed through the dark clouds. It was darker than the sky and loomed outward like a dangerous chipped and well used axe. With a startling burst of lightning it was illuminated with stark white light against the rainy gray. It emerged from a gray-brown island rock and soared upward, threatening to slice open the sky.

"An island shaped like an axe." Hiccup said with a clutch in his voice.

"My gods!" Astrid whispered as the entire island came into view. It

was a half the size of Berk but much less pleasant. No vegetation grew and the ground was scarred with jagged rocks, rocky ruins, and petrified trees.

The old port town was a muddy slop of a village on the only smooth side of the island. It was shoddy and beaten down and weathered. Old rickety docks went out to sea but had been ripped and shredded by the water.

Thunder crashed much closer and lightning soon followed.

"We need to land." Astrid reminded Hiccup.

"I know." Hiccup was thinking. He got exasperated when he was deep in thought. "But we can't just fly in on Toothless."

That's right. They'd been warned that this place wasn't dragon-friendly. Astrid sometimes forgot that Berk was one of a kind with its peace with dragons. Thunder and lightning shook the electrified air around them.

"That was too close." Astrid said. That flash left her hair prickling. "Hiccup, we need to land."

"I know." He said, exasperated.

They flew down, avoiding the village. Every other part of the island was covered in jagged and dangerously leaning rocks. The wind was picking up and pushing them toward the teeth-rocks too fast.

"Hold on!" Hiccup yelled as the ground came too fast. He pulled Toothless to the left to avoid a sharp impact and they crashed onto what might have been the only semi-flat chunk of rock.

Toothless roared as he hit the ground. His two riders were flung off and thrown haphazardly into the rocks. Thunder banged all around, a constant war in the sky, and lightning flashes and zapped between the clouds with vengeance. A bolt slapped into a high rock and sent debris showering down.

Astrid had slammed into something hard. She could feel the bruise form already where something particular sharp and jabbed her side. She coughed up the gasp she'd had to swallow.

"Astrid?" Hiccup gasped.

"I'm fine." She answered before he could ask. "What about you?"

"Yeah." Hiccup groaned. "It's just my pride."

Toothless groaned too, shaking off the undignified crash.

There was a shrill cry that pierced her ears. She clasped her hands over them but it was persistent. It was short but it was joined by a mob of anger, hate, rage, and what she could describe only as insanity.

Looking around she saw what the commotion was. The darkness that had been quiet was in complete uproar. Dead faces were twisted in sneers,

frowns, and murderous glares. Their blackened eyes were viciously searching and rolling, hands clawing at anything within their reach. Nails dug into dead skin, scraping and clawing like a desperate mad-house clamor.

She tried to get up but she stumbled. Their only drew their attention to her. Their black eyes darted to her and suddenly they clamored toward her like a blue-white and black wave, hands reaching out and mouths gapping with horrid splitting screams eking out.

One of them grabbed her arm in a cold clammy grip that felt like sharp frozen pine needles. Nails were etching marks into her skin and cold dead eyes were wide, staring up at her from a hundred dead and starving faces, a hundred cold hands reaching out to pull her back in.

"Stay away from me!" Astrid screamed as she wrenched her arm from death's grip.

The act took all her balance and she was stumbling backward when two arms reached around her. She reacted in desperation and tried to wrench herself free but they tightened and held her against something sturdy, warm but cold. Recognizing Hiccup's hold she sank into him.

"Astrid?" Hiccup asked. He pulled her closer and held her tight.

She buried her face in his shoulder until the dead subsided. She gripped his shirt, her knuckles shaking and white. It took a while but the dead simmered and eased back into the lingering darkness on the outskirts. She looked over Hiccup's shoulder. They were in-between the rocks with watching faces and bulging eager eyes.

"Astrid?" Hiccup said, softer this time.

He had clamped her arms around her and they'd fallen to the ground. Astrid waited just another moment, making sure the dead would not purge again, and leaned away from Hiccup.

He didn't ease his hold on her but gave her enough space to look at him.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I just-" Astrid stated but Hiccup stopped her.

"It's okay." Hiccup said. "What happened?"

"They justâ€¦it's nothing." Astrid shook her head. She didn't want to talk about it right now. She wanted to forget about it. "We need to find shelter before we get drenched. Come on."

Thunder boomed overhead. Hiccup wanted to argue but knew she was right. Toothless snorted as they started making their way inland, toward the bigger rocks and greater possibility of caverns.

"I know, bud, I don't like this place either." Hiccup said, giving Toothless an understanding pat.

The rocks grew taller, like a dense forest of rock-trees and stone

dirt and gray dust. Hiccup kept a hold on Astrid's hand and looked back at her every few steps. Thunder banged on the sky and shook the rocks. The island rattled like it was only a few bangs away from shattered.

As the cold drops began to fall they found the closest thing to shelter. It was a slit in the large rock that grew into the axe. Toothless blew a plasma blast into the slit and it lit up, and went far enough into the rock to shield them from the rain. Toothless volunteered to go in first and bounded inside. Hiccup and Astrid followed as the rain fell harder.

The mouth of the small cave wound back into a low cavern. Toothless made a lap and decided it was adequate. Thunder roared outside and rain pelted the rocks. In the cavern it was a murmur, although a loud murmur.

Toothless grumbled as he settled down, laying in a semi-circle around the walls of the cavern. He blew a blue-white plasma blast to give Hiccup enough light to find the saddle bag he'd packed fire supplies in. It took a few minutes, and the fire was smaller than the previous ones, but it was adequate.

"This whole places feels soâ€¦dead." Astrid whispered as the fire flickered with its minimal warmth. She folded her arms over her chest and sat beside it. She felt safe with Toothless behind her.

"Astrid, are you alright?" Hiccup asked as he sat down beside her.

"Yeah." She said, knowing it was a lie. He was looking at her with those persistent, determined green eyes. She avoid that gaze and kept her eyes into the fire.

"You don't look alright." Hiccup said. He was leaning in, and brushed stray hair that had fallen out of her braid. He spoke softer, "Astrid, what do you see?"

Her eyes flickered toward him when he asked. He was still boring those eyes into her. "It's nothing, Hiccup. It's nothing."

"I don't believe you." Hiccup leaned forward so she had to look at him.

She couldn't lie to those eyes. But what to tell him? The dead were having a mild freak-out? She tried to speak but stopped before words came out several times. She was flustered with the heart thumping suddenness of the ordeal and frustrated that she was so flustered and couldn't shake it. She was Astrid Hofferson, Fearless Astrid Hofferson. She shouldn't be shaken so easily.

"Astrid, you can tell me." Hiccup whispered.

She inhaled. "It'sâ€¦it's justâ€¦they were everywhere."

"The dead?" Hiccup asked.

She nodded. "I don't know what happened. They justâ€¦went insane. They were screaming and crying and they justâ€¦swarmed toward me and I justâ€¦I was freaked out. They were so loud, and angry."

"Don't worry about them, Astrid. We'll fix this and they won't bother you anymore." Hiccup said as he tucked his arms around her.

"I'm sorry, Hiccup." Astrid said. She could feel the emotions she'd like to swallow and forget welling in her throat. She buried her head into his shoulder. "I hate feeling like this. So vulnerable."

"It's fine." Hiccup said into her hair. "We're here. Me and Toothless."

Astrid almost laughed. Hiccup knew he wasn't much of a fighter without Toothless. Now, a Night fury was a force Astrid could feel protected by, but the thought was there. Toothless must have sensed that something was wrong. He inched from his place and nuzzled Astrid with a gentle purr of a sigh. He curled back around them so that he could see into the cave's narrow corridor.

"It's a good thing I packed firewood." Hiccup said. "Or we'd be sleeping in the cold."

The fire was small but burned with bright orange and yellow. It was warm enough to evaporate the cold and wet from the day. Hiccup let go of Astrid just long enough to pull out one of the blankets from the saddlebags. Astrid parted from him to help lay it out. He reached for the second and pulled Astrid underneath it with him.

She collapsed into him and hugged him close. They lay like that for a while, until the temperature was raised into the comfortably range.

"Thank you, Hiccup." Astrid sighed into his shirt. She didn't need a shoulder to lean on very often but when she did Hiccup was always right there, no questions and few comments. "For being there."

"I should be saying that to you." Hiccup said. "I did spend a year without you, and it was horrible."

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" Hiccup asked. "Dying?"

"I didn't do it on purpose."

"Most people don't." Hiccup laughed.

Astrid laughed into him, even if it was a hallow laugh. "So, how do you want to do this?"

"Do what?"

"Find this guy." Astrid said. "We came all this way now let's nail this jerk."

"We can't do much in this weather." Hiccup said. "We'll wait until the rain stops and maybe before dawn have a look around the town. See if we can find the inn or something. And sorry, bud, but you'll have to stay in here."

Toothless growled a sigh.

"I know, but dragons aren't like much here." Hiccup said. "We need as little attention as possible."

"So we've got some time." Astrid sighed.

"Looks like it. Soâ€¦do you want to talk about it?"

"Talk about what?" Astrid asked. About the guy? She knew as much about him as he did. But when she glanced at his face he was looking at her like that again. He wasn't talking about the guy. "Not really. I justâ€¦I was overwhelmed. I guess when we got here there was a lot ofâ€¦_excitement_, and a lot of _them_. Their anxiety and fear wasâ€¦like I was drowning in it."

"Are they better?" Hiccup asked. He squeezed her shoulder.

"I guess." Astrid said. "They aren't screaming anymore."

"Astrid, are they like that all the time?" Hiccup asked. "Is there any time where you can't see them?"

"I don't know how to explain it." Astrid sighed. "Yes, they're there all the time but they aren'tâ€¦right here. It's like a shadow on the edge of my vision, and if I focus on it they grow likeâ€¦like a wave. There are there, inside it, swarming like bugs on old food."

"That's gross." Hiccup said.

"It was the first thing I thought of." Astrid smiled into his shirt. The beating in his chest waved away the distasteful shiver that had started along her spine.

"We'll get this guy and go back to Berk and you won't have to worry about that anymore." Hiccup said. He hugged her, and found her hand laying on his chest and laced his fingers with hers. He yawned. "We'll go back and live a normal life. Me, you, and Toothless, and Stormfly."

"We're a family already?" Astrid whispered. He got chatty when he was exhausted, but the things he said didn't pass through the mental filter. There was a phase when he was half-asleep when he would talk and talk, mostly nonsense, but it was adorable.

"We will be." Hiccup said, eyes closed, in a sleepy sigh.

Astrid smiled and felt a bit of a blush leak into her cheek. She was glad Hiccup was near sleep and missed it or she'd hear about it for a month. With a protective dragon on one side and Hiccup on the other, she couldn't be more comfortable. This, right here, was what she wanted.

There's chapter fifteen! Whoo! Fun fact: original I wrote this chapter from Hiccup's perspective. But at the end it felt boring, like there was so much more in there and I'd only scraped the surface. So I decided to re-write it from Astrid's point of view and I love it.

Fun fact I learned today â€" I've been spelling it "lightening" when in fact, it's "lightning". Go fancy new Word for catching that

oppsy.

16. Chapter 16: The Man Who Eludes Death

And here we are! I wrote this chapter and then re-wrote it about three or four times. But why waste time with such introductions? Onward!

Chapter 16: The Man Who Eludes Death

Hiccup and Astrid were shaken awake by Toothless's mumbling roar. He was standing over them stepping lightly, struggling between nudging them and not. At the sight of their open eyes his head perked up and he jumped up and over them. He bounded to the cavern's mouth and looked eagerly back at them.

"What is it, bud?" Hiccup grumbled. His voice was dry from sleep.

Astrid rolled out of Hiccup's loosened grip and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Toothless growled and twitched his head toward the narrow passage leading to the bright outside. The daylight was glowing through.

"The storm's stopped." Astrid pushed herself up and let the blanket fall as she stood. She went to the cavern's mouth and looked beyond Toothless. He twitched impatiently.

"How long have we been asleep?" Hiccup yawned. He still felt exhausted even though he'd slept soundly. He sat up as Toothless whined, looking between Hiccup and the outside. "Alright, alright, I'm up."

Astrid started through the passage and when Toothless saw Hiccup following, he bounced after her. The outside was bright. The sky was clear and the air was crisp and clean. The jagged teeth of the island were still desolate but a little less foreboding. There was a subtle oceanic breeze blowing between the tree-rocks that whistled.

"We should check out the village and see what we can learn." Hiccup sighed. The salty air was refreshing. It reminded him of the warmer days on Berk.

"I agree." Astrid said. "A scouting mission, then we'll head back here and eat. Sound like a plan?"

"Yeah, let's go." Hiccup nodded. He turned toward Toothless who bounded beside him, eager for adventure. "I'm sorry, Toothless. You're going to have to stay here."

Toothless lowered his head and looked up at him, mumbling a sad tune. Hiccup stepped toward him and held out his hand. Toothless whined but pressed his nose against Hiccup's palm. Hiccup knew he hated being left alone and especially in a strange place. There was this nagging in his chest as he watched Toothless slink back to the cavern's narrow entrance way and plopped down inside it.

"I'm sorry, Toothless. These people aren't like Berk. They aren't dragon people." Hiccup tried to explain. "We'll be back

soon, okay?"

Toothless sigh-growled.

Hiccup sighed. Leaving Toothless behind was like leaving his other foot. He gave his dragon one last look before he and Astrid trailed through the rock-trees. There wasn't enough room between the rocks to walk side by side, or even in a straight line, and they ended up in a single file zigzag. It was like walking through a forest of sea stacks that sprouted from the hard ground every few feet in sporadic patterns. Somewhere high above them gulls argued with each other.

It didn't take too long to return to their crash site from the night before.

"You'd think as hard as we hit there'd be a dent." Astrid mused. She stood with her hands on her hips.

"The ground's pretty hard." Hiccup said, tapping it with his metal leg. It clinked. Solid rock. How did an island made entirely of rock exist like this? It was just a rock in the middle of nowhere. What kept it up? Or did it go all the way to the ocean floor like a giant sea stack?

Astrid sighed. "How far do you think it is to the port?"

"I don't know. It's on the other side of island." Hiccup shrugged. It was only half of Berk but one foot it would seem much larger. "I forget what it's like to walk."

"I know." Astrid groaned, rubbing her shoulder and stretching her neck. "We're getting spoiled with all these dragons."

The island was fairly flat besides all the rock-trees and giant axe in the center. It stood above them like a colossal rock compass. They were standing almost directly in front of its blade. The village sat against the flat base on the right side and this cave was on the left.

Astrid came up beside him and let out a sigh. "Let's get this over with."

She started on the right side of the island and Hiccup followed a few feet behind her. The sun warmed the salty air while they walked and gulls flapped back and forth. It took upwards of an hour before rock huts started to erupt from the ground. They were of simple design, three rock slabs leaning precariously against each other with a fourth serving as a roof.

"It's a whole little subdivision or something." Hiccup mumbled as he investigated one hut after another.

"It looks abandoned." Astrid said.

She was right. Most were falling in on themselves and crumbling. People hadn't been living in them for a long time.

"How could someone live in a hole like this?" Hiccup asked. The space was tiny and dark and completely exposed to the harsh elements. It made the Viking homes on Berk look glamorous and luxurious, not to

mention warm and welcoming.

They left the rock huts and continued along the flat side of the axe. It was ominous how the stone axe turned as they walked the island. The number of decrepit huts increased but there still were no sights of recent human life.

"Is there anyone even on this island?" Astrid complained. She came to a halt and groaned.

"Well, there's that." Hiccup said coming up on her left. He pointed forward where the color of the rocks changed from plain grey to mud gray. "Looks suspicious. I've got an idea, come here."

"What?" Astrid said.

Hiccup motioned upward. He widened his feet and laced his fingers and held them out as a foothold.

"Seriously?" Astrid asked.

"Yeah, we'll get a better view." Hiccup said. Besides, he rarely got the chance to impress Astrid with strength. She usually jumped on the strength-reliant obstacles which didn't give him the chance.

"Are you sure?" Astrid asked. She looked at him with that face again, the one where she didn't understand her logic or plan but was prepared to trust him.

"Yeah, come on." Hiccup said.

Astrid stepped closer and balanced herself with two hands on his shoulders. She secured her foot in his hands. They shared a glance, and a silent count to three, and Hiccup hoisted her up with an involuntary grunt. Astrid rested the knee of her other leg on his shoulder as she balanced to a scouting position. Hiccup inhaled sharply. The inside of her knee was against his cheek, it was practically her thigh. Her abdomen rose and fell with her breathing not even a half a foot from his head.

"I can see it!" Astrid said.

She wasn't heavy but Hiccup wasn't used to holding very much weight for prolonged period of time. He admired that she was strong, inside and out, but he also enjoyed the opportunity to prove that he wasn't weak.

She moved even so slightly closer to him and Hiccup felt his heart thump heart in his throat.

"It's not that far. But I don't see any people." Astrid said.

Hiccup was glad that she told him without him asking. He wasn't sure that he could without sounding physically stressed.

"Alright, put me down." Astrid said, tapping him on the shoulder.

Hiccup gladly obliged. Astrid didn't pay much attention to his reddened cheeks or his relish in letting his arms fall limp at his

sides.

The village felt too large for the lack of people. The majority of it was on the rocky beach. Old rickety docks reach out over the steely waters and waded into the mud colored village of wood and stone. Many of the buildings were rotting, their wooden slabs nothing more than weathered driftwood. It stretched all the way back to the axe's base.

It was an old sea port that had long been forgotten by passing trade caravan ships and traders. The people who would want to live in such a place where those who wanted to be forgotten with it: thieves, pirates, crooks, and murderers. It was home for runaways.

"It's so depressing." Astrid crossed her arms.

The closer Hiccup and Astrid got the stronger the stench. It was rotten fish, human decay and defecation, death, and booze. Between the buildings haggard looking men slept in doorways and inside the derelict homes.

"Are they dead?" Astrid whispered to Hiccup.

"I don't know." Hiccup shook his head. They certainly looked dead.

Hiccup held an arm out to stop Astrid from following him. He inched closer toward a skeletal man sleeping open-mouthed in an uneven doorway. He reeked. Hiccup had to inhale and hold it to stop from gagging. The man was breathing slow and shallow.

"That one is alive." Hiccup whispered as he stepped back.

The man twitched like a fly was itching his cheek. Hiccup and Astrid moved away from him but each person they spotted was in the same catatonic state.

"What is wrong with all of them?" Astrid asked.

"I don't know." Hiccup shrugged.

They were all glassed over and bruised, a few gasped incoherently as they passed. One latched out at an invisible enemy with clawed hands before falling to the ground in a crumpled heap. Astrid jumped at the sudden commotion and grabbed Hiccup's arm but soon let it go and cleared her throat.

"Which one of these dumps is the tavern? Or inn? Or whatever." Astrid said quickly. "They all look the same."

Hiccup looked around. They did all look the same. All dead and falling apart, except for, "that one."

Hiccup pointed and Astrid followed his finger to a multiple story stone structure complete with curtains in its windows and the single door on the first floor. They looked at each other and in their silent communication started toward the curtained door together.

The curtain was moldy and heavy. Hiccup walked in first and held it open for Astrid.

The inn was as shoddy as the outside but the atmosphere was trying to be welcoming. A few lantern lit the windowless space. The tables and chairs were a mix of wood and stone. It was a rectangle with one side lined with a waist high stone bar. Behind it were what looked like a mish-mash of off-colored booze.

"There's no one here." Hiccup whispered.

"I noticed." Astrid whispered back.

"It's too early for drunks and whores." A grump voice shouted from the other side of the room. A leathery faced man was stepping down a narrow staircase that was tucked into the corner. He halted on the last step as he caught sight of his visitors. Pausing, he smiled and jumped calmly to the tavern floor.

This man was different from the others they'd seen. He was alive, healthy, and alert. Cold gray eyes stared at them with a malicious humor. His graying brown hair was pulled back and left to mess. He was built solid and sturdy and looked as though he'd spent a great deal of time on the water, an old pirate.

"Waitâ€¦I know you. You were," Astrid started, a little taken back.

"The captain from that ship." Hiccup finished.

The old captain laughed. "Yes, I know. It's strange how these thing happen." There was a vicious undertone layering his hearty voice with abrasive confidence and ill-humor.

Hiccup was at a loss of words. It was the same leathery faced man with cruel grey eyes, unnaturally solid stature, and unreadable expression. They'd met him and hadn't even known it. And now he was staring at them with interest.

"I will be honest, I didn't think I'd see you again." He said to Astrid, with a quick wink of his eye. He laughed. "What did you think of my acting? I've gotten pretty damn good at it."

Hiccup and Astrid shared a glance. They'd lost the element of surprise. Now what?

"Let me guess, you came all the way to this gods-forsaken hellhole for some of my infamous whiskey?" he laughed. He laughed like he spoke, like he was shouting into a ferocious storm. Suddenly, his face went still and blank. His gray eyes were burning despite their color. "No. I know exactly why you are here."

"You do?" Hiccup asked, trying not to look as useless and terrified as he felt. This man was at least four of him and probably ten times are strong. He and Astrid didn't have a chance to take him on as they were now.

"You think I can't sense your kind a day away?" He spat toward Astrid with hateful spite.

"So it _is_ _you_ then." Astrid confirmed.

"Yes, yes, 'The man that eludes Death'." He said dramatically. He flashed his angry eyes toward Astrid. "Quite the reputation, isn't it sweetheart?"

Astrid made a guttural sound that she used to make when Snotlout would make his crude comments or suggestions. But the man just laughed at her.

"Do you have a real name?" Hiccup asked, tentatively.

The man shrugged. "I've had hundreds of names. Different city, different name. Different trader, different name. But on these shores they call me Richard.

"Death loves to send the desperate fools that come crawling to his feet over to me. He just can't stand it that I got away, got out from under his thumb, his control." Richard laughed. He leaned back. "In my five hundred years I learned to listen to those miserable spirits that snap at my toes. They're like starving cats hanging in my windows, waiting for a scrap. When they get quiet that means they are appeased, and waiting. Death has sent someone else to find me, someone else to get the revenge that so many are yearning uncontrollably for and can't get themselves.

"Why are you still here?" Astrid asked.

Richard laughed again and tilted his head at Astrid in a way that made her shiver. His glare was deep in hatred and distrust. "Just like a woman. Always wanting to know why, and how, and everything else that doesn't concern you. But, since it's been a while since I've told my story I'll give you a treat before you leave empty handed. Drink?" He laughed at his own joke of generosity. He turned to Hiccup. "Before I tell you mine, let me guess yours. Your bitch died and you go all the way to bargain with Death? And thus he sends you on this little escapade."

"Uh," Hiccup stuttered but his face gave him away.

Richard nodded, "That's what I thought."

"Why does that matter?" Hiccup said.

"Because it ties into my story." he explained like it was as simple as air. He poured himself a glass of dark yellow liquid that singed the air around it. He downed the entire glass and licked his lips. "Near five hundred years ago I was a young man just like you. I devoted my entire life to the most beautiful, wonderful, amazing woman I knew. I have that tramp everything, and what does she do? She goes and dies on me. Just like that. Didn't even say goodbye! So what is a caring, loyal, loving man to do?"

He scoffed at Astrid and glared. She crossed her arms tightly over her chest. He gave her a long look before he continued.

"I too traded with Death for a damned woman. He must have been feeling generous that day because he let me. And what did I trade for my dead lover's soul? Just my entire family. My whole family, gone, just like that, and he gave her back to me.

"And how does that bitch thank me?" He slammed his fist down on the

bar with a vicious roar. "She called me mad and left me. Turned away, and left. Me! Who gave her everything and had nothing left. She was all that I had and she pushed me away like worthless fish bones. Ungrateful, vixen of a wretch. They are all the same. Selfish whores only looking out for themselves and _their kind_."

He shouted an angry growl and then suddenly came back to a calm expression. "And what happened to me? Death used his witty between-the-lines tricks to lay claim on my soul too. Apparently when I sold my entire family to him, I was included. But I wasn't going to let that devil win. I was attacked constantly by spirits stuck in limbo, trying to claw me to bits because I wasn't half mad like them. I spent the next fifty years learning from them, to become like them. I traded my humanity for immortality. And that drives Death insane. He isn't in control and he can't stand it.

"I'm in limbo, but I'm still in this world. I've cast off my mortal shell for this pure spirit form, no longer confined by flesh, blood, and bone. It's been quite nice. I spend time on the waters, exploring and expanding my horizons." He said, taking another drink and swallowing it whole.

Hiccup and Astrid shared another glance. Now what? Hiccup hadn't made a plan for this far. And still didn't.

"Soâ€¦then I guess you're not going to just come quietly, then." Hiccup said.

The man look at him with a curious glare. "No. I'm not. Why should I give up what I've worked so hard for because you can't live without a wretch? I don't care."

Hiccup stepped forward. "But, you know, five hundred years is a long time, aren't you even just a little bit tired? Eager to get on that long rest?"

The man wasn't the slightest bit humored. He wasn't going to be tricked so easily. He leaned toward Hiccup. "I'm going to let you in on a little secret, boy. The broad isn't worth it."

"Yes, she is." Hiccup argued.

The man shook his head and leaned back without taking his piercing eyes from Hiccup. He didn't like being argued with.

"I brought her back, went to Death, and here _we _are." Hiccup said, standing his ground despite the intimidating glare beating into his face. "Astrid stayed with me. She is helping me. We're doing this _together_, as a team."

"You think that now." he said. "In a week or two, or maybe even a year, she'll be gone and with someone that's not you. She'll change her mind like they do, play her woman games where no man ever wins."

"You're wrong." Hiccup said. He wasn't going to back down.

The man said nothing but didn't extinguish his glare. "I had your problem once. Seeing everything as half-full, always anticipating the silver lining. You're too kind-hearted, boy. You're a fool. That kind

nature makes you see the good in people instead of the rotten, selfish, ignorant beasts they are."

"There's nothing wrong with seeing the good in the world." Astrid intervened. But Hiccup and Richard were too deep in their staring contest to pay her mind.

"But I can fix that." Richard whispered. He reached out a hand so fast no one could react. He pressed his hand against Hiccup's chest.

It felt as though the air in his lungs was pulled out of him, rather than pushed, and replaced with a terrible ice. It surged from Richard's hand and pulsed through his limbs. He couldn't move or breathe or do anything.

"Hiccup!" Astrid shouted. She jumped forward and grabbed onto Richard's arm.

Just as her hands tightened he let go. Hiccup lost his balance and fell to the floor. He rushed a hand to his chest. The ceiling spun. The inn felt darker. He feltâ€¦different. What happened?

Richard wrenched himself free of Astrid's grip but she wasn't paying attention to him. She knelt down beside Hiccup with hands ready to help him.

"Whatâ€¦what did you do?" Hiccup gasped.

"I'll let you figure it out." Richard sneered. "But I'm going to have to ask you to leave. You're bad for business."

Richard inhaled deeply as Astrid helped Hiccup stand. With one violent swish of his callused hand a darkness surged into the bar and pushed the two of them out. They were thrust through the curtain and dropped onto the hard ground outside in a heap. The darkness retreated back and vanished into the tavern.

"What?" Astrid asked, looking back into the tavern.

Hiccup groaned. "Would you get off me?"

Astrid did, but not without a curious look.

"What?" Hiccup asked. What was that face for? Like he'd done something wrong.

"Are you alright?" Astrid asked, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Hiccup shoved her hand away. Why wouldn't he be? Did she think him so weak he couldn't handle a little push?

Hiccup took several steps away from the tavern. He felt so irritated! He punched the air. He looked back at the tavern and Astrid as still looking at him _like that_. What was her problem?

"What?" Hiccup demanded.

"Nothing." Astrid shook her head quickly. "But let's get back to camp

for breakfast. Toothless is probably starving."

Hiccup didn't say anything but headed out of the village. He'd taken several steps before Astrid jogged to walk a step behind him.

Hiccup didn't feel like talking. There was a crick in his neck he couldn't get out and a burning urge to punch something. Astrid kept trying to talk to him about stupid things he didn't want to talk about. He just wanted to get back and get something to eat. Then he'd feel better.

There was a pain in his chest. It started where Richard had touched him. He rubbed it with his hand every few steps but it wasn't going away. He felt dizzy, like he was spinning. When they got back to the cavern's mouth he felt terrible. He couldn't walk straight.

"Hiccup, let me help you." Astrid said. She reached for his arm but he jerked it out of her reach.

"I'm fine." Hiccup growled.

Hiccup?" Astrid asked.

Hiccup choose not to respond. He went into the cave where Toothless was waiting. Astrid followed.

Toothless was resting in their camp and when he saw them he bounded with enthusiasm. He bounced toward Hiccup but stopped a foot short of his rider. His eyes were wide and cautious, suddenly stilled in Hiccup's presence.

"Let's go, bud." Hiccup motioned outside. "See if we can get some fish."

Back outside Hiccup started toward the nearest water. He turned around just in time to see Toothless nuzzle Astrid and she returned his gesture with a shrug and a worried glance in Hiccup's direction.

"What?" Hiccup demanded.

"Hiccup, are you sure you're alright?" Astrid asked.

"Yes, Astrid, I'm fine." Hiccup spat. "Why wouldn't I be? I'm just hungry."

"He could have done something to you." Astrid said. "I'm just worried that he could have-"

"I'm fine, Astrid." Hiccup said a little louder. "He didn't do anything. Now, I don't want to talk about it, or anything else, until after breakfast."

Astrid held her tongue while Hiccup and Toothless scrounged up enough fish for the two of them and a hungry dragon. She was a step away while the fire was built and the fish were cooked.

She watched Hiccup as he ate. That man _had _done something. There was no question. Hiccup wasn't himself. He was aggressive and angry. But what had that man done and how? He had commented that

Hiccup was too kind hearted and then he pushed him down and Hiccup was different.

"What?" Hiccup spat at her. She hadn't realized she was staring.

"Nothing, Hiccup." Astrid said quickly.

"Then stop it." Hiccup demanded.

"Stop what?" Astrid asked. She was never the one to back down. She couldn't help it. When someone pushed, she pushed back. It was her nature. But it wasn't Hiccup's. How could that be changed?

"Stop being nosy." Hiccup spat at her.

His eyes had changed. They were still the same brilliant green but they weren't happy and kind. They were wicked and angry. He was looking at with her distaste and distrustâ€|like that man had looked at her.

"I'm not being nosy, Hiccup. I'm worried about you!" Astrid clenched her fists.

"I don't need you to worry about me!" Hiccup threw his half-eaten fish down with force and stood up. Astrid stood up, too, not wanting to be overshadowed.

"It's never bothered you before!" Astrid shouted back.

"How do you know what bothers me?" Hiccup shouted.

Toothless flattened himself on the ground. He looked back and forth as they shouted at each other.

"What did he do to you? You're not like this!" Astrid shouted. She'd never seen him this mad before. They'd never shouted at each otherâ€|Hiccup hardly shouted at anyone.

"What do you care? It's my business, stay out of it!"

"It's too late for that!" Astrid shouted. "We're struck together, Hiccup!"

"We are? What's stopping me from leaving you here? Toothless is mine and your dragon is gods-know-where." Hiccup took a step toward her.

"Whose fault is that?" Astrid snapped.

Hiccup shouted, an angry roar, and threw his fists into the air. He turned and closed the space between them. "What is your problem?"

"_My _problem?" Astrid half-laughed. "Right now it's you!"

Hiccup lost it. He shouted and struck her cheek with his hand. She gasped at the impact and had just enough time to place a hand over her stinging cheek before Hiccup roughly grabbed her arms and thrust her backwards. Her back slammed into a rock-tree and the air was

pushed out of her.

Toothless jumped up and growled but held his ground.

Hiccup was breathing heavily and holding tightly onto her arms. She didn't know what to say. Hiccup had hit her. He'd yelled and then hit her. She couldn't say anything. She could only stand here, in his tight grip, and stare at him in disbelief.

He stared back at her. His eyes were still and searching her face. His hands loosened but didn't let go.

"Astridâ€" Hiccup stuttered, letting his hands fall to his sides as he took a step back. "Astrid, I-I'm sorry. I don't knowâ€" "

"He did something to you." Astrid said weakly. She still kept a hand to her cheek. It didn't seem real.

Hiccup looked at the ground, his hands, and then at Toothless who was still poised and ready to strike if needed. His large cautious yellow-blue eyes were watching Hiccup without blinking.

"Did I hurt you?" Hiccup asked.

"A littleâ€" but it's fine." Astrid said.

"I don't know what happenedâ€" I justâ€" I was so angry, and irritated, and everything was making it worse. I still am, I'm justâ€" aware." Hiccup put a hand to his chest. "What could he have done?"

"I don't know." Astrid said.

"I'm so sorry, Astrid. I'll-I'm going to clean this up." Hiccup said, turning to the dwindling fire and the fish he'd thrown.

Astrid was about to say something when she saw a ghostly mass ease out of the darkness. It was the ghostly woman standing between the rock-trees. She was looking at Astrid with her black-dead eyes. She left Hiccup to himself and walked over to where the woman stood.

"He told you all about me?" She asked.

"He did." Astrid said.

"I knew he would. He blames me for all that he's done." the ghost woman shook her head.

"Do you know what he did to Hiccup?" Astrid asked quickly, not wanting to waste time.

"Something he's done before. He had spent enough time with the spirits he can manipulate them." she said. "He has altered the boy's spirit."

"But Hiccup is alive." Astrid said.

"We all have a spirit, alive or dead. It is born when we are and needs the mortal shell to protect it while it grows and learned and becomes stronger. When we die our spirit is strong enough to live outside of the mortal shell." the ghost woman sighed.

"But how can he mess with spirits like that?" Astrid asked. "Make them angry or mean?"

"He has had plenty of time to learn all there is to know about spirits and their mysterious workings." she said. "He goes into the spirit and changes things around, changing the person themselves."

"Can I do that?" Astrid asked. "Go in and reverse what he's done?"

"I don't know." She shook her head. "It is complicating as anything can be, and he is the only one that I know of that can. But, being a spirit yourself you have better odds than most."

"I have to try." Astrid said.

"It is risky."

"He dove into hell for me! Without knowing what would happen or if he would even come back. I have to try to help him. No matter the consequences." Astrid argued. He had done so much for her and she hadn't done much for him lately.

The ghost woman nodded, almost disappointed, and vanished back into the darkness. Astrid jogged back to the fireside where Hiccup and Toothless had put out the fire and made it nearly invisible.

"Hiccup, I know what I can do." Astrid said, hoping he would still be aware.

"What?" Hiccup asked irritated, but regained control and repeated, "What?"

"He altered your spirit." Astrid said.

"What?"

"Just listen." Astrid said, putting a hand up to calm him. "He went inside you and altered your spirit. I don't know how but he changed you and I think I can go in and fix whatever he broke."

"Go inside me?" Hiccup asked.

"Not physically, but spiritually." Astrid explained. Truly, she didn't know how she would do such a thing.

"Are you sure?" Hiccup asked.

"Yes." Astrid said.

"Then let's go." Hiccup stood up.

"Back to the cavern." Astrid instructed. Just in case something happened.

The cavern was dark and soon a fire was roaring again. Hiccup and Astrid sat across from each other with Toothless laying around them.

He watched them cautiously and without interruption.

Astrid pressed her palm flat against Hiccup's chest like the man had done. At first nothing happened. An idea struck. She focused on the darkness and it surged around her like a force. The same force he'd used to push them out of the tavern. It flowed around her and blocked out the flickering firelight. She could feel a pulsing underneath her hand, an energy moved into her hand and from it, wholesome and strong.

She closed her eyes and concentrated on it. She could feel it. The world was fading away and everything around her was darkness. It was like floating through the clouds. She was weightless and free.

She opened her eyes to a world she could never imagine.

And that's chapter sixteen! Kudos to you who called the whole creepy captain thing. I love how a lot of you thought it was Chuck, but I tried to write him as more of a loveable jackass, kind of like Snotlout. But him as the bad guy would have been a neat idea too â€” almost a little too predictable though.

17. Chapter 17: Defragment

Thanks for all the reviews! I didn't think I'd be able to update this week but I'd forgotten that I'd already drafted this chapter. I've been watching Fatal Frame walkthroughs on youtube this past couple days to get my creepy sense back.

Onward!

Chapter 17: Defragmentation

Astrid opened her eyes to a world unlike anything she could have imagined. There was no ground beneath her or a sky above. At first she could see nothing but a swirling fog in the space around her, but in a short few moments the strange light of the world shifted. An even stranger world appeared.

Lights. Millions and millions of lights of all sizes and colors were sparking in a thousand shades of brightness. It was only comparable to the brilliance of a moonless night. Only instead of looking up at it Astrid was swimming between the stars.

The more she looked the more she saw. The stars were varying in distance. Some were so close and bright they looked like miniature suns while others were so far away they were tiny pinpricks. It seemed to go on forever.

Thin, almost intangible lines crisscrossed through the space. Less than spider webs but unimaginably stronger. Somehow, Astrid just knew. They were connections. They were connecting the tiny stars on an invisible grid.

Were all these stars spirits? Of course they were, Astrid could feel the answer inside her like she'd always know it. Those innumerable stars were spirits of people who still lived in the fleshy world, anchored by bone and blood. But all these spiritsâ€”there couldn't possibly be that many people?

This entire place felt so big and so small at the same time. All these people made Astrid feel her humanly insignificance. There was no floor or ceiling or walls. It was just a space. She would have lost her breath had she been breathing. Spirits didn't need to breathe, she guessed.

But how to find Hiccup's spirit among of these? Her body was sitting right next to his so he couldn't be that far, could he?

"Hiccup?" Astrid tried to speak but there was no sound.

He came to the front of her mind. She could picture him as he saw when she last saw him. He was sitting in front of her and ready to put his life in her hands.

Her thoughts ignited a reaction. She could see a tiny thread going from her and glowing a bright gold. She knew it would lead her exactly where she wanted to go. To Hiccup.

She began to follow it but it didn't feel like she was moving. The spirits were floating past so she must be or all of them. Time and space operated differently here. There was no time to keep thing in a pace or space to measure distance. Here, neither of those things mattered. Things simply were.

She must be moving for a glittering spirit was coming toward her on a collision course. The closer it came the worse it appeared. It was not glittering as spirits that passed but flickering in a twitching dim light, as if stuck and angry. It came to her and she knew it must be Hiccup's spirit. It was an absolute mess.

The others were neat little bundles of swirling energy that had an organic rhythm and coherent pattern of pulsing light. But Hiccup's was tangled and confused. It did not glow bright but a dingy gray that burped patches of dangerous red-orange. There was definitely something wrong with him.

But what to do about it?

Somehow, she knew. It seemed so simple. If his spirit was tangled in a knot then she had to untangle it. But how? Astrid reached out to it but it was hot.

But she wasn't going to give up that easy.

She pressed into Hiccup's troubled spirit but she was unprepared for the result of her actions. Hiccup's spirit flooded into hers. It was a rushing of heat, a chaos of mangled memories, disrupted fears, and destroyed hopes.

Astrid retracted from him and it faded to a stop. His spirit had burned with an orange-red and as she withdrew her hands came back to gray. What should she do? She had to untangle it but she couldn't without invading it. She didn't want to be so invasive without asking Hiccup first.

But to leave and come back? That felt too time consuming. There wasn't a way around it. Astrid reached back out but this time she was prepared. Energy surged back into her.

Piece by piece Astrid defragmented Hiccup's tangled spirit. Memory by Memory, aspirations, fears, dreams, and hopes. She memorized each one to put it back in the correct order.

All of him, all that he was, was in her hands. His entire being. She could do this. She had to do this, for Hiccup. It was like Esol had said, he'd dove into hell for her. If he was willing to dive into the unknown for her then she had to be willing to do the same for him.

It didn't take long to see the problem. Wading through his spirit she saw where tweaked had been made. His anger was pushed before everything else. The area about it was pulsing red, ruffled and irritated. As she defragmented his spirit the color began to soften.

She handled each piece of him as though it might shatter at the slightest provocation. At last, he was scattered all around her in a thousand pieces, a million tiny drops of stardust. She had taken the tangles apart so they were no more. And now it was time to piece him back together.

As carefully as before she pieces him back together, beginning at the core and working her way out. The glowing pieces glowed brighter together. With every piece reinserted the spirit as a whole grew brighter. Finally she held the last piece. It was pulling toward him as if it knew where it needed to go.

Carefully, she replaced it. At once a change was visible. His spirit shifted into a soft blue and shone bright for a moment before subduing. It was back to how it was, how it should be.

His spirit reached out to hers. Astrid didn't hesitate to reach back. His spirit pulled her closer. She had seen everything in him, everything that made him, and it was only fair that he should have the chance to see everything she was.

The collided with a blast of hot radiant light. Merging together they became as one being. All at once everything was shared, a mutual mind and soul, laced together without seams. Everything his was hers, and all hers became his. Memories, doubts, fears, dreams, and everything in-between.

Astrid knew that it wasn't just because of fairness that she reached back for him. No, not at all. She wanted to know everything about him and wanted him to know everything about her. That spiritual intimacy was what she wanted and knew it was within her grasp.

It was that love that Vikings sung about and told stories about. It was that fabled love that send men across seas and off the edge of the world, even into the underworld. That mythical love. They had it.

Their spirits calmed and separated with a yearning not to. Astrid held on as long as she could and Hiccup did the same. Eventually Astrid felt herself being pulled back into the living world of weight and flesh. It came around her spirit and bound it with bones.

All around her was darkness. She felt the cold of the cavern and

Hiccup's warmth beside her. His arms were tucked around her and she was holding onto him. They had collapsed together onto the cavern floor. Hiccup stirred and breathed in her ear.

"Astrid?" Hiccup called out. His voice sounded raspy and dry.

"Yeah." Astrid gasped out. Her body was exhausted.

"What happened?" Hiccup asked. He loosened his arms and they untangled themselves from each other. Sitting up, they kept hold of one another.

"Iâ€¦don't know how to explain it." Astrid said. She honestly didn't know. It had all been soâ€¦surreal. Did they just have spirit sex? In a brief moment of panic she took her body into account and sighed when she felt clothing still covering her. "Do you remember anything?"

"Yes." Hiccup said like it was the entire point. "But it's not all about me. I remember stuff about you, things that I didn't an hour ago. It's likeâ€¦I went inside your head or something."

Astrid smiled despite him not being about to see her in such stark darkness. "It was something like that. Our spirits collided."

"I thinkâ€¦I remember that. It's all fuzzy, like a dream, but you were there and I reached for you and thenâ€¦weird stuff happened." Hiccup said. He got tongue tied when he tried to explain things he didn't fully understand.

"That is what happened, Hiccup." Astrid told him.

"Tell me, Astrid." Hiccup insisted. "I want to know."

Astrid told him everything she could remember. The blackness of the cave didn't deter them. Astrid held tight onto his hands and from them she could see him. She could feel his spirit.

"You justâ€¦reassembled me?" Hiccup asked. "How do I know you didn't so something weird and change something else?"

Astrid could hear the humor in his voice and laughed. She was blushing but didn't care because she knew he couldn't see it. "Because I like you just the way you are."

Hiccup started to speak but pulled his words back in with a sharp inhale. Even in the dark, Astrid could tell he was smiling and probably blushing too, by the sound of his embarrassed but flattered breathing.

She found his cheek with her hand and then leaned to it and kissed him lightly. He followed her movements and held her in place with his arms. He pressed his cheek to hers.

"Thank you, Astrid." Hiccup whispered into her ear. He kissed her cheek.

Astrid felt the time was right and when his arms loosened she followed the curved of his cheek with hers. She hovered her lips over

his for just a moment to give him the chance to kiss her first. He hesitated and she leaned in to for the kiss. Although he hadn't initiated it he returned it wholeheartedly.

There was a growl from somewhere and a sharp blue plasma blast lit the dark cave. Toothless was standing in the cavern's mouth with curious but welcoming eyes. The blue light illuminated the blackened stack of twigs that had been their fire.

"Hey, bud." Hiccup said, embarrassed like they'd been caught.

His arms loosened and they stood. Hand in hand they followed Toothless back outside into the starry night. Dark blue clouds drifted across the sky and the ocean lapped up on the shore.

"How long were we out?" Hiccup asked, looking upward.

"Long enough. I'm starving." Astrid noticed as her stomach grumbled violently.

"Me too." Hiccup said. "A midnight snack?"

Toothless growled in excitement and bounced toward the ocean.

Berk had calmed down but was still on edge. Hiccup had been gone just a few days and it seemed that the news of Astrid's sudden return had settled in. Stoick knew it eventually would. He had stopped the insurgency but there was talk of death and doom. There was always so much a chief needed to do. He didn't need rumors still flying around about Astrid inciting panic and unreason. But, unfortunately, Vikings will be Vikings.

Stoick was thinking about a break off his feet when he passed the smithy. Gobber was inside working on some ungodly saddle design. He was humming merrily as Stoick came in and sat down with a hard sigh.

"Rough day?" Gobber asked, not missing a beat with his hammer-hand.

"Not any more than usual." Stoick said. He was not a complainer and wouldn't start now. He had too many complaints on his plate already and didn't need to add his own.

"Gobber, I need this sword sharpened." Ingrid came fast from the side holding an old sword in both hands. She hadn't seen the chief before she'd spoken but when her eyes fell on him there was a moment of regret and uncertainty.

"Sure thing, Ingrid." Gobber said, taking the sword and examining it with an expert's eye. "Geeze, this couldn't even cut through butter." He tossed it over the forge's fire.

"Evening, Chief." Ingrid said, a generic comment.

"Ingrid." Stoick nodded. He hesitated but when she took a step back in preparation to leave he knew this time was as good as any.

"Ingrid, is something bothering you?"

"Why no, Chief." Ingrid said, but Stoick knew she was lying.

"Are you sure?" Stoick asked again. Sometimes he felt like the only adult on Berk delegating bickering children. "You don't look well. You are sick?"

"No, I'm not sick, Chief." Ingrid shook her head. Stoick stood up. He'd found that standing was often more effective at information gathering than sitting. It worked. Ingrid sighed and in an irritated and exasperated voice she said, "When Hiccup bringsâ€|_her_ back, how am I supposed to just welcomeâ€|_it_ back into my home?"

Stoick sighed. He knew it had something to do with Astrid. Ingrid hadn't been the same since she'd seen her niece alive again.

"Oh, I forgot myâ€|socks, on the line, at home. I should go get themâ€|you know, wrinkles." Gobber mumbled as he stumped away from the smithy in the opposite direction of his house without a clothesline.

"Ingrid, you can keep treating your niece as a monster or you can accept her and move on." Stoick stated sternly. "It's up to you but don't you think moving on is a lot easier?"

"Just like that?" Ingrid asked with a shrug. "Don't you worry about what this could mean? The dead coming back? Don't you worry about your son? It's a step in a horrible direction, Stoick."

"I know what it _could_ mean." Stoick said. He inhaled. The hot air from the forge filled his nose. "My son loved that girl enough to walk blind into hell for her. He did what few others are brave enough, or fool enough, to do. I'm not going to take away his second chance at happiness."

"But, Stoick, she isn't-" Ingrid started.

"If you had the chance to bring Finn back, wouldn't you?" Stoick said in a sudden outburst. He hadn't meant to but this woman's stubborn unacceptance was blistering his chiefly patience. To make up for it he lowered his voice, "I know I would if I could see Valka, even for a single day. They have a chance to be together again and I'm not going to yank it out from under their feet."

Ingrid didn't say anything. She looked back to the forge where the sword was heating up. Her eyes were glistening and her gaze was distant. She was holding it back. Stoick had recognized that same look on Astrid many a time. They were holding back what they felt and keeping it inside. Tears were for the weak and desperate and not for strong women.

"I'm sorry." Ingrid said quietly, after a long pause. "I'll try my best."

She turned from the forge without another word. Stoick hadn't noticed until he relaxed that his hands were clenched.

Hiccup had never felt like he did that night. They ate by firelight and justâ€|talked. They had talked so many times before but this time felt different. He knew things about her and she knew things about him. It was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. It wasâ€| oneness that was so incredibly inexplicable. Astrid already knew all the

things he couldn't put words to.

But eventually the conversation went back to the man in question.

"What are we going to do?" Hiccup asked. "He knows what we're trying to do."

"I know." Astrid said. "But, there's got to be something. A weakness or flaw that we can exploit and get the upper hand."

"Don't you think everyone else has tried that?" Hiccup asked. If they weren't the first ones to try to trick this man then he knows all the tricks that had been tried.

"There's got to be something that no one else has thought of." Astrid said.

Hiccup groaned. She was being a lot more optimistic about this entire ordeal. "Wait, Astrid, do you think you could manipulate his spirit like he did mine? Do something so that he wasn't so smart?"

Astrid blinked a few times before she answered. "I don't know. I'm not sure how I fixed his mess."

"But you did." Hiccup said. It was possible. "He might not see it coming."

"He sees everything coming." Astrid said, like she'd repeated it.

Hiccup eyed her carefully. Her eyes were staring absently to the left of the fire. Her head was tilted like someone was speaking over her shoulder.

"Astrid?" Hiccup asked. Was she listening to the dead? The idea sent a shiver up and down his spine.

Her eyes reverted back to him. "He's got eyes and ears in the dead. He's got his minions that report back to him like his own army of spirit thugs."

"Then he knows exactly what we're saying?" Hiccup asked.

"It's likely." Astrid nodded.

Her head tilted again and Hiccup felt that shiver return. What was it like to have the dead whisper in your ear? Even if it was useful information it still seemed outrageous and terrifying. Hiccup would rather take on a dragon than a ghost. At least he understood dragons.

Astrid was listening to whomever with intent. Hiccup could see the thoughts forming in her mind and ideas coming together. She would occasionally nod slightly, in agreement or understanding, but she never said anything in return.

The water lapped up and the fire was dying down when at last she spoke to him.

"Hiccup, I have a plan." Astrid said.

"What is it?" Hiccup asked, eager to hear what she and the dead had drummed up.

"I can't tell you." Astrid shook her head. She put a finger to her lips.

Hiccup almost argued but then he understood. She didn't want to tell him and let the dead know. To speak it aloud was to give it away. Was that to be their strategy? Secrets? He didn't like it one bit. How was he supposed to go alone with a plan he didn't know?

"Astrid, I don't know about that." Hiccup said.

"Hiccup, trust me." Astrid said. She was looking at him with that look again. Did she do that on purpose? "I have faith that you'll know what to do."

He sighed, knowing there was no use in arguing. Her mind was set and that was that.

"Alright." Hiccup nodded. "Let's do this."

And there is it! Chapter seventeen! Man, I didn't think I'd get this story this far. But, since I've been obsessing over fatal frame again I actually scribbled a plot for a sequel. Who know, right?

18. Chapter 18: Now or Never, Part 1

Okay, this is it! The last installment! The final chapter! Thanks to everyone who stuck with this story from the beginning to the end! It's been really cool reading your reviews and knowing that you've enjoyed it. I hope you all enjoy this last bit just as much!

This last chapter turned out longer than I expected so it's in two parts. I'll try to update again as soon as I can.

Onward!

Chapter 18: Now or Never, Part 1

Hiccup wanted to know what Astrid was planning but she wouldn't tell. He'd only asked once but she had gave him that silent glare that meant he shouldn't ask.

After she'd gone inside his spirit they decided, or rather Astrid had decided, to stay at camp that night. They were both exhausted and the day was winding down.

"We should get some sleep. Tomorrow's going to be a big day." Astrid had said. That was the only indication that there was any "plan" at all. She'd talked about everything else and used her fake-laugh. That laugh had told Hiccup that it was all a front. She didn't want Richard's ghost minions reporting back to him.

They'd gone to bed early and Hiccup expected to wake up early. It was his surprise when he was roused by Astrid midmorning. She was leaning over him with a beautiful smile.

"Hey," Hiccup yawned.

"Morning." Astrid squeezed his shoulder.

Of all the past morning they'd woken up together Hiccup had been the first to rise. Having the morning turned around was pleasant. It took a few second to realize that Astrid's smile wasn't typical. It reminded him that there was still an act happening.

"Did you have breakfast ready, too?" Hiccup yawned.

"Nah, we can do that together." Astrid jumped up and held down a hand to help for him. He reached up and took hold of it and she pulled him up with unnatural strength. He'd never understand where she kept it all.

Toothless was already outside ready to fish. He was standing open-mouthed in the shallows. Astrid built the fire while Hiccup and Toothless fished.

The water was cool but the sun was warm. Hiccup sighed in the salty air. For a brief moment that morning he'd forgotten that anything was wrong. For that brief moment everything was fine. But then he remembered what they were doing. He'd remembered that Astrid had a secret plan.

It bothered him that she couldn't tell him what she was planning. It bothered him that she'd conferred with a ghost instead of him. If only she could do some kind of spirit thing and tell him without speaking, like she'd done before, and go inside his mind.

Hiccup looked to the gray beach. Astrid was poking the fire with a stick. She caught him looking and waved. He felt that fleeting flutter in him stomach. How could he sleep beside her and still get that feeling when she looked at him.

With enough fish for all three of them Hiccup and Toothless came back to shore. The fire was hot and ready and Astrid took responsibility of the cooking. Hiccup sat back and let the fire dry out his clothes.

He was lost in the fire when Astrid leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. It took him by surprise and he blinked as the suddenness worn off.

"What's that for?" Hiccup asked, unable to stop smiling.

"Just because." Astrid smiled back. She turned the fish.

"Just because what?" Hiccup asked. He leaned over to her and kissed her back, lingering his lips on her cheek. They'd been warmed by the fire.

Astrid turned to face him so that their faces were an inch apart. She whispered, "Just because I like you." And she kissed him.

They ate, and Hiccup couldn't help but wonder what kind of plan she had. How could they trick Richard? He wanted to know so badly and it was eating away at him to know that there wasn't much he could do

about it.

"The fish here leave taste in my mouth." Astrid complained. She went to the saddlebags and retrieve a container of water. She took a swig before she brought it back to Hiccup. "You?"

"Yeah, a little." Hiccup agreed. He took a drink.

"The water tastes a little old." Astrid complained. She said in it a voice that wasn't normal. It was higher pitched and whiny. "I can't get that mud taste out of my mouth."

It took Hiccup a few moments to remember that Astrid was acting.

"I don't know what to tell you." Hiccup shrugged. She was whining with intent. But what that intent was Hiccup didn't know.

"Does your back hurt?" Astrid asked. "Mine is killing me. If I knew we'd be sleeping outside every night I'd have brought more blankets."

"I'm sorry." Hiccup shrugged again. What did she want him to say? He hated not knowing the plan. "I kind of thought it was obvious that we'd be sleeping outside."

"Oh, you just assumed I knew?" Astrid said. This tone was different. It was bitter and a bit angry. She shot him a glance that didn't match that tone. She sighed, and Hiccup knew it was an act.

"I guess?" Hiccup shrugged. Angry Astrid he was used to, but fake angry Astrid was something else. "I mean, we are traveling. On dragons."

"Why are you saying it like that?" Astrid snapped.

"Like that?" Hiccup asked.

"Like I should have figured it out. Like I'm stupid for not." Astrid said. Her voice cracked at the end.

"What?" Hiccup said. How did she get there?

"That's exactly what you think!" Astrid snapped. She stood up with a stomp. "You've been doing that this entire time. That assuming thing where you say stuff like I'm dumb."

"No, I haven't." Hiccup argued. What had gotten into her? Was it the fish?

"Are you kidding?" Astrid threw her hands up. "You just know everything, don't you?"

"No, I don't." Hiccup shook his head. They never fought like this. Every argument they ever had he had understood. But this one just came out of nowhere and didn't have a point.

It didn't have a point. That was it! That's what Astrid was doing. She was picking a fight. She wanted them to fight. It was part of her plan.

"But, apparently, you do. So have at it." Hiccup motioned forward. If it was a fight she wanted then he'd play along.

"Excuse me?" Astrid crossed her arms. What that humor that Hiccup saw in her eyes?

"You want to be right all the time? Be my guess." Hiccup shrugged. "I'll come to you with all my decisions since you're so good at them."

"You think I make bad decisions?" Astrid demanded.

"I didn't say that." Hiccup shrugged.

"You didn't have to." Astrid stomped. "When have I made a bad decision?"

"You want just one?" Hiccup asked.

Astrid scoffed. "Like you are such a saint."

Hiccup shrugged. "I'd like to think so."

"Is that why you lie to your father so he doesn't know where you go?" Astrid spat.

Hiccup stuttered. That one had hurt. "It's not like I do it because I like it. I only lied to him because I didn't want him to know about _you_."

"Oh, and that worked out perfectly." Astrid snipped.

"What, you'd rather me just leave you in the ground?" Hiccup gasped. Why had the fake argument gone this way? It was like she'd punched him in the chest, in that place where only she could hit.

"It'd be better than being the village freak." Astrid said under her breath.

Hiccup started to say something but Astrid stopped him.

"Oh, don't pretend like you didn't notice. You say how everyone looked at me! Like I wasâ€¦unnatural. They were about _this _far from grabbing their torches and forming a lynch mob."

"I'm sorry you feel that way." Hiccup said. He felt soâ€¦_bad_. He couldn't think of another word for it. It was terrible. He tried to remind himself that it was all an act but it didn't make him feel better.

Astrid stood up and started too walked away from camp. She stomped and huffed to make her attitude obvious.

"Astrid!" Hiccup called and started to jog after her.

"What?" Astrid demanded. "You want to tell me that I was adopted, too?"

"Why would I do that?" Hiccup slowed to a walk but kept a few steps between them. "Besides, I thought you already knew that."

"See!" Astrid spun on her heels. He was better at this than she thought. She'd feared he be horrible at fake-fighting. "You're doing it again! I'm not an idiot, Hiccup."

Hiccup groaned.

Was that fake frustration at the fake fight or was he truly upset? Astrid felt terrible about keeping her plan to herself. But she knew that if she told Hiccup, even the slightest of hints, Richard would get wind of it. If they wanted to defeat him then they needed the upper hand.

Last night the ghost woman had come to her again. She hadn't told Astrid what to do but she had divulged important information. Richard did have a weakness. Two, in fact, that could be manipulated. Hard booze and pretty faces. The ghost woman had said no more but Astrid already had a plan forming.

She'd spent a good part of the night before thinking it over. She put it all together and finally come up with her plan. She could get closer to Richard by herself than she could with Hiccup. She would pretend to fight with Hiccup and then in her pretend frustration she would go to the tavern. After that, the ghost woman promised to help Hiccup with his part. He would prepare the portal where Death would be able to pull Richard back into the underworld.

Astrid had faith that he'd know what to do.

"Astrid, wait for a second." Hiccup called. He'd lost that fake-mad voice he'd been using. He sound legitimately upset. Had she gone too far with her fake-argument? She needed to remind him that this was a fake fight.

"Come on, Hiccup." Astrid spun on her heels. "Just give me some space, for once."

"What?" Hiccup stopped.

"Let me have my space." Astrid demanded. "Maybe I want to go for a walk, by myself, without you. You've always got to know what's going on and _talk _about stuff. Maybe I just want to shove it all inside and bottle it up."

She felt ridiculous for acting so silly but she couldn't think of another way to make a separation between her and Hiccup seem believable. She gave him an exhausted glare and turned away from him. She would fume a while and eventually arrive at the village. By then she would exhausted from the fight and the walk and need someone to talk to about it. Richard would have the prime opportunity to jump in.

And if Hiccup knew that Astrid was planning on using herself as bait he would have a fit.

"Fine, Astrid." Hiccup said. He still sounded upset. "Take your walk. I'll be here when you're done."

Good, Hiccup. Astrid thought as she stomped through the rock forest. She hadn't meant to get so personal but that was just the way the

argument went. She would apologize twice when this was all over and done with.

Astrid meandered toward the village. She looked behind her several times to make sure that Hiccup wasn't following. She knew they were watching her. She couldn't let her façade down for even a moment. Even though it was fake she still felt a tightness in her chest.

She was glad that she and Hiccup rarely fought. They argued, but it was never serious. They just clicked. They fit together and understood each other. She didn't understand those married couples who fought all the time. Why would get married if all they did was fight? She couldn't live like that. She'd rather not marry and be alone than fight.

She felt the space behind her eyes swell. It pressed against her eyes and face. Astrid put a hand to her cheek as water gathered along her lower eyelid. A tear fell. She pushed it away with her finger.

She was crying? Crying? No. No! Astrid Hofferson did not cry.

And yet, she was.

But it wasn't all lost. This was good! Crying made it look all the more real. She needed to milk this for all it was worth. She leaned against a rock tree and scooted to the ground and let it all out. The swollenness behind her eyes slowly deflated with each tear.

The sound was horrible. Her face was hot and sticky and her nose was stuffy. When all the tears are fallen she felt as though her head was twice as big as it should be. Her eyes were puffy and tender. Why was crying so gross?

She wiped away what she could and tried to let the hotness in her cheeks fade. She stood, but she felt exhausted. Crying had taken all of her energy. She was glad Hiccup hadn't been there to see it.

She kept walking even though she really could use a rest. She was a little glad when the village came into view. The roof of the tavern was a welcome sign. She managed an exasperated sob as she entered the village. She glanced at toward the tavern. Richard was leaning in the doorway with that curious and cocky pirate's smile.

Success.

Hiccup watched Astrid vanish between the rock trees. What had just happened? She'd gotten mad at him but he didn't understand why. And he had gotten mad at her back. He didn't understand that either. Was it part of her plan? It had to be. It had to be. She'd never just snapped on him like that.

He had stood there for a while after she'd walked off. Toothless looked at him like he understood and didn't know why Hiccup didn't. He paced around their morning camp fire until he couldn't stand it. He put out the fire and started after her.

Toothless jumped and growled.

"No, bud, stay here." Hiccup said quickly. He gave Toothless a loving

pat on the nose. The dragon whined but did not argue.

Hiccup jogged to close to space between him and Astrid. He had a feeling she was going to the village. Why did she want to split up? It didn't make any sense to him. But should he? He slowed to a walk. Maybe he staying behind was part of her plan.

Astrid had said that she had faith in him. She said he'd know what to do. But what should he do? Follow? Stay? He can't just leave her alone. He was trapped in his indecision while he walked. He stopped when the village came into sight. He just had a feelingâ€¦

Hiccup ran toward the village. He dashed, out of breath, just in time to see Astrid vanished into the tavern. Richard had held the curtain open with a leathery grin. He caught sight of Hiccup but his smile just widened into one that was much more sinister.

"Astrid?" Hiccup asked the air.

He took a step forward when a freezing cold grip seized his left arm. It sent a terrible shiver through his nerves and brought him to a sudden halt. He tried to shake it but the hold was strong and not diminishing.

It was a long moment before the grip ceased and Hiccup was able to pull his arm over his chest. He grasped the cold skin with the other. It was like ice.

"What?" Hiccup whispered.

He squinted at where the cold grasp had come from but he saw nothing. He strained his eyes. It was strangeâ€¦it was almost as if the air was distorted, like heat rising from a fire. A simmer of cold instead of heat. Something, whatever it may be, was there.

And then he realized what it could be, or rather, who it could be. The dead. The simmer outlined a humanoid figure of medium height and slight build. The more he concentrated on it the surer of it he was.

"Wait."

Hiccup felt his throat catch on a gasp. He was sure he'd heard a woman speak.

Before Astrid meandered back into the tavern she turned to make sure that Hiccup wasn't following. He wasn't. Her part of the plan was going just as she'd hoped. From here she just had to hope that Hiccup would know how to play his.

Richard's smirk grew wider and his pirate teeth peeked from between his sunned lips. He held the curtain open as Astrid walked inside. She heard him chuckle as she passed and it sent a horrible pitting in her stomach. The tavern was still darkly with lamps and smelt like seawater and stale mead.

Richard let the curtain fall back into the doorway. It swished with a humid slap.

"Please, take a seat and have a drink on me." Richard said as he slid

back behind the back.

Astrid sat down on one of the bar's rock seats. So far, so good. She was nervous and it fluttered in her chest like hectic flies. Richard grabbed two similar cups with one hand and a grubby bottle with the other, without looking at either. He wasn't taking his unusually bright eyes off Astrid.

"Hm?" Richard asked as he popped the bottle. He poured one for himself and held the bottle precociously over her empty cup.

"Sure." Astrid sighed. Remember, she'd just been in a fight with Hiccup. She had to look depressed and exhausted, emotional stomped on.

"So, do you want to talk about it?" Richard asked as the light brown liquid spilled into her cup. It smelt strong and stringent.

"Not really." Astrid sighed. Richard pushed the cup toward her and grasped his own. "I don't even know what happened."

"He finally got under your skin." Richard said with a gentle shake of his head. He took a sip from his cup and leaned down on the stone bar.

"I guess so." Astrid said. She'd never been this close to Richard. At one time he'd been a handsome creature but his skin had that worn leather look of pirates and fishermen. His hair was thinned and gray-streaked. He looked no younger than fifty-five but his eyes were much older than that. It was like he'd been frozen in time. "But we've never fought before. Not like we did. He was yelling. I was yelling. It was justâ€¦different."

"It's nature, you know." Richard said as he took a sip. "We aren't meant for these long monogamous relationships. Humans by nature are one-nights and a few days of fun. Listen, I've got this figured out. Remember that first moment when you realize you're into someone? They can do no wrong in your eyes. Those first few weeks are like magic. And then, that sense of wonder that surrounds them starts to fade. You start seeing all their faults, their flaws, and those annoying habits that somehow you can't stand anymore. The magic is gone and all that's left is the ugly truth."

"I guess that makes sense." Astrid shrugged. She gently turned the cup in her hands. The amber drink swirled with the motion. Sure, Hiccup had plenty of annoying habits but none of them bothered her that much. They were part of him and she'd accepted that.

"Love is just a myth people made up to try and keep two people together. It's just a thing we try to fool ourselves into thinking is real when the whole time it's just a lie." Richard said like he'd come across the secret of life. He took another sip and encouraged her to try it.

Astrid looked down at the cup. It lookedâ€¦unappetizing. But, not wanting to blow this whole plan she brought it to her lips. She took as small a sip as she could manage. It stung her tongue with an acidic heat and burned all the way down her throat.

She couldn't hold in the sound she made in the aftertaste. It was a

gasping disgust.

"It grows on you." Richard laughed.

"Why would you want to get used to _this_?" Astrid swallowed. That taste wasn't going away.

Richard laughed again as he drank from his. "Tell me, sweet, what sort of ugly did you see? Is he mean when no one else is around? Does he snore? Does he hog the blanket?"

"He's just â€¦needy." Astrid shrugged. She tried to take another swig. It burnt too but just a little less. She was prepared for it this time. Don't taste it, just swallow.

"Tell me about it, sweet." Richard asked, in a strangely kind voice. It was almost as if his care was genuine.

Astrid inhaled. Right, she'd just at a fight with Hiccup. Time for some excessive elaboration. "He needs to know everything about me, all the time. What I'm doing, what I'm thinking, and if I don't tell him he assumes that I'm holding something in or keeping something from him."

Richard made an agreeing sigh as he sipped.

"What, am I not allowed to keep secrets? It's not like we're married! But he can go do his own thing for a week and not tell me anything but if he doesn't know where I am for ten minutes suddenly I'm a terrible person." Astrid said quickly. At the pause she took a sip from the cup.

Richard was listening to this made-up ranting confession with such intention that Astrid felt a tingle in her spine.

"I hear you, sweet." Richard whispered. He was so close he didn't have to speak any louder. "The magic is gone. Time to move on and see new sights."

"Maybe," Astrid shrugged. "But he did dive into hell for me."

"I dove into the same hell for a woman, once." Richard said with a twinge of spite. "And you know how that story played out. Men and women aren't meant to be in those long relationships. That story-book romance is a lie. Love like that was a myth to trick us into doing crazy things for other people. We need new faces, fresh voices, new perspectives."

"It sounds nice." Astrid said.

"Sometimes, all we need is a little space." Richard shook his head. He was too interesting in her whiny complaints. It was more than creepy. He was too nice, too accommodating. His ex-lover was right, booze and women.

Astrid felt the burning liquor surge up her throat in an acidic burp. It came up before she could diverge it back down. Richard laughed and poured another glop of that pungent drink in her cup, and another three in his. Astrid pretended to be humored and laughed with him.

Richard told her story after story of useless pirate humor as the drunks came wondering into the tavern. Astrid listening to them as Richard served his patrons with that same smirk. His talking was slurring and his laughing was louder. In truth, Astrid was feeling the effect. Itâ€|weightlessness. Freedom from fragile flesh and stiff bones.

Admittedly, she didn't like it. She wasn't at the top of her game. The lag in her actions was troubling. It was like she was in someone else's skin, watching it all from a space away.

End of Part 1

It know it's a weird place to cut into as a chapter end, but it was the middle. Hopefully, the second part will be up in a few days. It just needs to be edited.

And I know this story doesn't exactly follow the Viking mythology and stuff, but I didn't intend it to. I intermixed the western character of Death instead of the Norse one. I admit, this story might have been a little better if I'd done my homework. But I still like how it turned out. Maybe, one day, I'll go back and edit in the Norse myths instead. Who knows?

And I've actually written out the outline for a sequel. It's not as long as this one but it's got an ending and a beginning so that's a start. Let's say, if this story gets one hundred reviews, I'll post the epilogue to this story and I'll work on that sequel with the intent to post.

19. Chapter 18: Now or Never Part 2

102 reviews! You guys are awesome! I'll have that epilogue and sequel summary up sometime soon. For now, he's part 2, the final chapter!

Chapter 18: Now or Never, Part 2

Richard continued to drink, sip by gulp, and his stories grew louder and more slurred. He kept Astrid's cup as full as his own, but as his steps became uneven she started to spit it out. No one would notice the extra smell with all the drinking going on. She'd stopped when the edge of her vision had gotten blurry.

Hopeless drunks stumbled in, one by one. Many were still stale from yesterday's drinking.

"Morning," A few of them slurred. Most of them didn't speak at all but grunted.

"Please, excuse me." Richard would grin and slide away from the counter, grabbing another bottle behind him and saunter over to the newest bottle-less drunk. He sat it down on the table or into waiting hands. There was a rare audible thanking or a groan as Richard walked away.

"Ah, poor drunken bastards." Richard sighed as he slid back. He'd seemed to forget the story he'd been telling about the sailor who got

seasick. "They're like old dogs. You feed and water them and they'll love you forever."

"No matter how you treat them." Astrid said. Thankfully, Richard laughed.

"That is also true. I can kick their sorry selves out of here and many times I can and they'll always come dragging their feet back. Loyalty is a pain like that."

Astrid laughed with Richard then, but she wasn't thinking about the drunks. Talking about dogs and loyalty had reminded her of Stormfly. Dragons were the same. No matter how mean or stupid their riders were they looked at them with the utmost love and trust.

She just hoped that Stormfly hadn't forgotten about her.

"What's wrong, sweet?" Richard asked in a lower tone of voice. He leaned back on the counter. "You look like you've lost something. Was it a dog?"

"She wasn't a dog." Astrid said. She'd almost confessed to having a dragon but she'd held it back.

"You're from Berk, right?" Richard asked.

Astrid felt a tightening. Berk had become a mythical dragon land between seafarers. They'd been silly to think Richard hadn't heard the stories.

"Yeah." Astrid nodded.

Richard smiled and leaned in closer as he whispered, "A dragon?"

Astrid nodded. This might be the edge she needed. Sharing something personal was like tying a bond. "Yeah."

"What's that like? Having a dragon?" Richard asked. There was a tint of actual curiosity in his bright eyes.

"Awesome." Astrid smile. "They aren't just pets. They're like partners, and friends."

"Friends that can breathe fire." Richard smiled.

"That they can." Astrid returned his humored grin. Fire-breathing _did_ come in handy. "And they can make life a whole lot easier. Flying isâ€¦the most incredible thing."

"Flying?" Richard asked. "Aren't you afraid of falling off?"

"Not at all." Astrid said. "Before you ride a dragon you've got to make a bond with them. They trust you and you've got to trust them. If you fall they'll catch you. And we have saddles. It makes falling off slightly harder."

Richard laughed. It wasn't even funny. Astrid was making good progress.

He looked around the dingy tavern. He leaned in even closer. Astrid could smell the harsh liquor on his breath and feel it against her lips. "Well, the drunks are drinkingâ€| and the next round isn't due for another two hours."

Every instinct she had was telling her to get away from him. Her head was screaming to run as fast as she could out of that damned tavern. But this is what she had to do. She had to swallow her pride and her instinct.

"I've got a room right upstairs that's a lot more comfortably than this place." Richard whispered. He held out a hand over the counter. Astrid held her tongue to the top of her mouth and tried to hold back her disgust. She placed her hand in his and he closed his rough fingers around hers.

With any luck at all, Hiccup will be where he needs to be.

The more Hiccup concentrated the more he was positive someone was standing there. The temperature on his arm was slowly stabilizing. The shimmer became more definite, more defined. Dark hair surrounded a pale white face and ran down like dirty water over tattered clothes.

"How can I see you now?" Hiccup asked. Was this what Astrid had been seeing this entire time? It was absolutely terrifying. The woman wasn't ugly but she wasâ€|dead. Hiccup could see right _through _her. Her very presence gave him chills. He was grateful it was daylight.

"It doesn't last." the woman spoke. It was the same half-voice he'd heard. It was like someone was calling across a valley. Dark, mournful eyes were looking at him. She looked so sad.

"Why?" Hiccup asked. She made him remember when he was small and hid from the dark under his blankets.

"Astrid will be luring him away from his tavern. Time is of the essence." the ghostly woman said. She moved her hands when she spoke and it gave him a shiver. The shimmer that she was moved like a watery heat wave. "We must hurry."

"What?" Hiccup asked as the ghost woman began to move. She didn't walk. She floated, even though her legs were moving. Her knees were ambulating beneath her dress but there were no feet to touch the ground.

"Follow." she motioned him with her see-through death-white hand.

Hiccup hesitated but he did as he was told. Was this the woman who'd been talking to Astrid this whole time? Astrid didn't think he noticed but he did. Someone had been talking over her shoulder, giving her bits of advice, this entire time.

The ghostly woman came and went out of his sight. Every few feet he would see her faded white form. She led him back to the tavern where a drunk was leaning against the outside wall. He was drinking from a dingy bottle. He paid them little mind.

She led him to the back of the tavern. The pointed up with her dead hand. Hiccup followed her finger to the second floor. The first floor was solid stone but the second was wooden panels. Three windows spotted the side and she was pointed to the first one.

"In there." She said.

"What?" Hiccup asked. "You want me to climb the wall? Why not just walk in through the front door?"

"You can't be seen." She pointed up. Her voice was adamant. "Quick."

Hiccup wasn't the best climber. The wall was jagged and might be able to make it but he wasn't sure. He found grips on the wall and started to climb. Handholds often crumbled under his weight and footholds were no better. The window looked so far away.

"You must." the ghost woman said from the ground. "For Astrid."

Strength had never been his strong point. He pulled himself up but it was hard. His arms were aching and he wasn't even halfway up. The ghost wasn't nearly as encouraging as Astrid.

How he managed to keep going he'd never know. He reached for the uneven window ledge with a shaky arm. Crashing down onto the wooden floor, his arms were like limp noodles. He took a moment to catch his breath and let his arms rest.

He'd landed in a simple room with wooden walls. There was a faded rug in the center and a four poster bed against the wall with several old blankets draped across it.

"Get up, there isn't much time." the ghost woman said. She was standing near the window with the sunlight around her. It didn't shine through her, like a thin curtain. The image gave him a terrible shiver.

"What do I do?" Hiccup asked.

"Thin the veil between this world and the next." she said. She pointed to the half-tattered rug on the floor. "Underneath it."

Hiccup knelt down and pushed it aside. With her instructions Hiccup used the short dagger he kept with him to cut into the wooden floor. The ghost woman drew with her transparent finger along the floor and Hiccup followed it with the blade. It was becoming a complicated symbol that reminded him of the altar the mysterious woman had made back on Berk. Sweat was gathering along his brow before the ghost woman withdrew her finger.

"Blood." she whispered.

"Whose?" Hiccup asked. Then he realized he was the only one there with it. "Me?"

"I would offer, but," she tried to smile. Hiccup liked her better with a straight face. She was less eerie.

"Right." Hiccup nodded. He wiped the blade off on his shirt to avoid splinters. He inhaled, held it, and pressed the blade against his arm. Drops of red seeped out and onto the carved symbol.

His blood hissed as it hit the floor. A shadow ran along the line like black water.

"You've done what you can." the ghost woman said. "Death is waiting."

There was a clamor outside the closed door.

"Hide! He comes!" the ghost woman vanished.

Hiccup could hear Richard's voice on the other side of the door. A hand landed on the loose knob and it jingled against the wood. He yanked the rug back over the symbol and the door unlatched. He couldn't jump out of the window but there wasn't anywhere else to go.

The door was opening and Hiccup threw himself onto the floor beside the bed. He rolled underneath it just as two pairs of feet came thundering in. Hiccup recognized Astrid's boots and assumed the other to be Richard's. The door was shut with a hard push.

They were standing too close for comfort. Hiccup exhaled and that's when he heard it. His fists clenched around the dagger and his jaw tightened. He knew that sound: clothes shuffling, close-space breathing, lips on lips. Hiccup held in a curse. Astrid had used herself as human bait, female bait. She knew that he wouldn't have agreed with it.

They crashed onto the bed and the wooden slabs creaked. Hiccup's fists were shaking. He'd never felt so fervently mad before. He'd never wanted to strangle another human being before.

This had been her plan. To use herself as bait and get Richard to leave the bar willingly and have Hiccup draw the symbol on the floor. He was proud of her but he was also frustrated.

Richard was breathing hard, sharp exhales and groans. Hiccup had the dagger in his hand. He imaged shoving it up through the bed and right into Richard's chest. But, with the tip poised and already making a dent in the bed's wooden underside, he knew it was stupid.

There was a pause in the hasty breathing. Astrid mumbled something but it was too muffled for Hiccup to understand.

"I've had five hundred years of experience." Richard whispered back in a voice that only increased Hiccup's desire to murder him. "I guarantee I can satisfy you like that little punk never could."

Punk? Hiccup grit his teeth. His knuckles closed around the dagger had gone white.

Astrid mumbled something else. What had she said? Hiccup strained his ears but it was too late.

"You don't think so?" Richard laughed.

The sound of his laughter made him feel like he hadn't bathed in months. Hiccup heard the sound of thunder in the distance. It rolled again and the light in the room dimmed. Hiccup looked out from underneath the bed. The room had been filled with sunlight from the open widow but now the window was darkened.

Thunder lashed and the tavern shook. Hiccup swallowed. It wasn't ordinary thunder. It wasn't just in the sky but it rattled the ground underneath him. The entire island seemed to shake. The sky outside looked as if thick storm clouds were rolling.

"What's that?" Richard asked. He'd lost his smooth tone and his suspicious anger returned.

"Thunder?" Astrid said.

"No." Richard said.

Hiccup held his breath. Richard was on alert. By the sound of the shuffling on the bed Richard was moving.

The thunder was continuous. The tavern rattled and rambled like the worst of earthquakes. The boards threatened to fall from their rusty nails and the stone crumble. It sounded like the entire island was crumbling. Wind blew hard against the tavern, whistling as loud as a dragon's roar.

Hiccup heard it before he saw it. The floorboards rattled and the floor beneath the rug seared. The wood was turning burnt black. Darkness was seeping through the wood. It cracked and ached with strain as the black etched like a tattoo into the floor. It was spreading like dark daggers. The rug was swallowed by the darkness. Hiccup scooted out from under the bed as it spread to the bedposts.

Richard shouted in anger. Hiccup jumped to his feet just as the bed began to crumble. The back legs went out and it fell at an angle. Richard was looking at the dark portal with a horrible grimace. Astrid sat up and pushed herself away from the center of the room.

A terrible laughter came from the center. Hiccup recognized it at once as the creature he'd meet in that horrible room made of bones.

Death.

The entire tavern was shaking violently, and splinter by splinter was being sucked into the darkness. If they didn't get out now they'd be sucked in too.

"Astrid!" Hiccup called. He stood and tried to hold himself as steady but it was like trying to stand on Toothless in flight. He reached out a hand to her.

"Hiccup?" Astrid asked. But her confusion soon went away and she reached for his hand. She climbed over the unsteady bed frame.

"No!" Richard shouted as the laughter grew louder. He grabbed

Astrid's hand just as she stepped onto the floor.

Death's laughter echoed upward as the blackened floor swirled like the underworld. The air went cold and still but the thunder lashed and hammered. The hooded skeletal creature came from within the whirlpool and moved like the ghostly woman had, only he had a substance about him that she didn't. Hiccup couldn't see through him but everything around him was the same color as he was. Death's laughter filled the room and the entire tavern. Hiccup pulled on Astrid's hand she Richard kept her in a tight grip. His face was twisted in anger. He knew he'd been tricked.

The tavern shook dangerously. It wouldn't stand much longer.

"I've got a special place just for you." Death said. He soundedâ€|happy. It was worse that the ghost woman's speaking.

Hiccup pulled on Astrid but she wasn't budging. She was trying to free herself form Richard but he wasn't going to let go.

Death reached out with both of his boney hands. Two black claws came forth from them and descended onto Richard. They encased his body in darkness. It tightened and pulled him upward, but still he held tight onto Astrid's arm.

"Let go!" Astrid cried. Richard was being pulled downward.

"No!" Richard spat. "If I can't cheat death then no one can!"

"Let me go!" Astrid cried as her feet began to drag on the floor toward the portal. Death was laughing, but his laughter was joined by a chorus of otherworldly others. They were crackling and screaming with hysteria. With his strong grip on Richard, Death was descending back down through the portal to the underworld. Richard let out a shriek of protest but the black claws covering his body spread to his mouth and silenced him.

Richard's grip wasn't letting up on Astrid and she being dragged down with him. She was struggling but it was no use. Hiccup held onto the doorframe but felt his grip lessening. His arms were aching and felt like they might be torn from his shoulders.

Richard's feet touched the swirling darkness and the hoard of vengeful spirits chorusing behind death began reaching up through the portal. Their dead and decayed hands were ready to rip and claw the source of their sorrow to pieces for eternity. Their deafening enthusiasm was not in question. They wanted Richard and they did not care if they had to drag Astrid down to get him.

The entire inn was being pulled in and the doorframe was loosening. It was cracking under his hand.

"Hiccup!" Astrid called to him. "Let go!"

"What?" Hiccup shouted. "No!"

If she thought he'd willingly let her be sucked back into the underworld then she was wrong. They would have to tear his arm off before he'd let go.

"Hiccup!" Astrid cried, her voice detailing the same strain he was feeling.

"No!" Hiccup said.

He kept his grip on Astrid's hand tight. The tavern was being destroyed around them but he'd never let go, no matter what. The boards shook and one by one they were taken. The doorframe disintegrated under his hand and Hiccup fell onto the floorboards. The wind was pushed out of him as he and Astrid were quickly pulled into the dark abyss.

They were thrown into the fiery void of darkness. Hiccup could see nothing but black. His hand was threatening to seize but he wouldn't let go of her hand.

"Astrid?" Hiccup asked. He could hear her breathing next to him.

"I'm here." Astrid's voice was quivering.

Her hand was the only thing he had. There was no light to see with and there was no floor or ceiling or walls, just like before. There was just darkness.

But there was plenty to hear. Richard's shouts and screams were growing more distant but his agony was loud. The angry spirits surrounding him multiplied with every moment as their shouts and hollers called and jeered. They ate at him like starving dragons around a barrel of fish.

"What now?" Astrid asked.

"I don't know." Hiccup shook his head even though she couldn't see. They were stuck. They were floating in this space with no conceivable way to escape. His hand was hurting but he feared that if he let her go, even for a moment, he'd never see her again.

"Hiccup!" Astrid called. "Look at that!"

Hiccup saw what she'd meant immediately. Within the dark abyss was a dim opening. It gapped like a giant mouth. Before it was a terrible mass of clawing souls. Their pale faces were taunt and twisted in anger, eyes wide and empty sockets, mouths wide and blaring violent sirens. Richard's desperate calling could be heard from within it. More and more spirits were gathering on the mass as the tore and clawed. The mass slunk into the abysmal mouth. Howls, screams, and wails were echoing from its depths.

Astrid gasped as the mouth closed around them with a great whomp. The small light it had made was gone and they were back in the hollow darkness. The sounds of death and suffering was distance and the air was cold.

"Hiccup, do you think we died?" Astrid asked.

"I don't know." Hiccup said. "I still feel alive."

"You've been here before, right? How did you get out?" Astrid asked.

There was a tinge of desperation in her whisper.

"Yeah, but Death kicked me out. I don't remember doing anything special." Hiccup said. There was a gust. They were being pulled gently downward.

"What's happening?" Astrid asked.

"I don't know. Hold on." Hiccup said. He squeezed her hand.

The darkness swirled around them. Spirit yelped and called and crawled about the spiders on invisible webs. They weren't acknowledging the two humans among them, like they considered them the same.

"It looks different this time." Hiccup said. He was trying to remember how it did look but he couldn't think of anything solid. It had been dark and surreal, and the bone room had come to him, not the other way around.

How long they floated Hiccup didn't know. It felt like such a long time. Hours, maybe more. A panic set in. They would talk every now and then but they'd ran out of things to say. What if this was it? What if they couldn't get out? Death was nowhere in sight.

_What if this was it? _

Hiccup couldn't lose her again. They'd gone through so much, too much. On the bright side, at least he wouldn't have to mourn her a second time. But, then his father would have to mourn a son. That imagine struck him hard. The sight of his father grief stricken was a knife in his chest that choked the air from his throat.

"Are you okay?" Astrid whispered.

"Astrid," Hiccup choked out.

"I'm here." Astrid said. She was trying to be calm but there was no hiding the panic in her voice. Her words were choppy like she was too cold to talk. "I know this looks bad. Do you wish we'd just taken the ten thousand years?"

Hiccup swallowed. He wasn't cold, but he couldn't feel anything. It was like his soul of being pulled out of his skin. He was numb.

"I don't know." Hiccup said. Words felt far off. Like he was speaking in a dream. "I'd rather be a servant for ten thousand years than live fifty years without you."

Astrid paused and Hiccup wished he could see her face. What was she thinking?

"Me too." Astrid whispered.

He felt Astrid squeeze his hand and bring her other hand to rest on top of his. He pushed his arm to move and rested his free hand on them. Moving felt so disjointed in this abyss. He felt he should say something else but before he could a sudden impact below his feet knocked them both to the ground.

The floor was as dark as the abyss and the walls of pale white bones emerged around them. The light was dim but Hiccup could see Astrid beside him. Their hands had been dislodged and she was pulling her arms around herself.

"I didn't think you could do it." said Death from a short distance. He was standing where he had before, dark and hooded, but with the poise of a proud father. His empty voice flowed with an ecstasy. "I've sent warriors and barrel chested pirates to knock that scum back into his place. Never did I think a pair of children would be the ones to trick him."

"I also had doubts." Hiccup shrugged. His feeling of numbness was subsiding.

Death laughed and shouted in victory. Hiccup jumped but Death didn't notice. "It doesn't matter. The eternal cycle has its own justice and ways. Nevertheless, you have my gratitude."

"What will happen to him now?" Astrid asked.

"Richard?" Death asked. He laughed, but more hollow and devious. "You don't want to know."

Hiccup felt a shiver run up his spine. What could a mass of angry, vengeful, delirious spirits do to the man they blamed without mercy? Horrible things that he didn't want to think about.

"Before I sent you back, I have an offer." Death said to Astrid. He held out a boney hand. "A onetime return policy, free of charge."

Hiccup looked at Astrid. He couldn't tell what she was thinking. She stepped up beside Hiccup, sighed, and slid her hand back in Hiccup's. She gave him a warm smile.

"No, thank you." Astrid said.

Death laughed and shook his hooded head. He mumbled something about flesh and mortals before he vanished. Darkness surged and the bone walls were gone and the floor fell from underneath them. The darkness rushed around them and with a _whoosh _and solid _whomp _Hiccup was staring upward into the brilliant blue sky.

Astrid groaned beside him.

"You okay?" Hiccup asked. Everything hurt, like he'd been stampeded by a herd of gronckles.

"I think so." Astrid rubbed her shoulder as she pushed herself up.

They were inside a bald circle that was in the middle of a scorch mark. The tavern was completely gone. The stony ground beneath was seared with a black burn. The village looked like it had gone through a terrible storm but most of its ramshackle buildings were still intact. Debris was strung about throughout the entire village.

Astrid was mirroring Hiccup's disbelieving grin. She started to laugh

and so did he.

"We did it." Astrid laugh.

"We won." Hiccup said. He ran a hand over his head.

Astrid threw her arms around him and knocked him back to the ground. She kissed his cheek several times before she pushed herself up. Laughing, she held out her hand to him and helped him stand. Hiccup felt his face get hot but he didn't worry about it.

"We might want to get out of here." Astrid whispered. She'd stopped laughing and was looking out to the village.

Hiccup followed her gaze and saw the faces popping out from windows and doorways. They were all open-mouthed and suspicious eyes. Hiccup and Astrid shared a silent laugh and made their way out of the ruined tavern. Before anyone could ask a question or comment they ran from the village. They raced through the outlying stone huts and rock forest. They didn't stop until they were gasping for air and clutching their sides.

They made it back to the clearing where they'd crashed on the first night. There were gulls flying overhead. It's hard to believe that the sky had been dark just a while ago. There wasn't a single cloud in sight.

"I still can't believe it." Astrid gasped. She sat down and laughed.

Hiccup laughed. He felt elated. He hadn't felt this good in a while.

"What's that?" Astrid asked.

Something was bounding through the rock trees at a good pace. Feet were pounding on the ground and having no trouble navigating between the rocks. Hiccup felt a little panic and stood, ready for whatever. He poised to defend himself when he heard a growl that only filled him with warmth.

Astrid laughed, seeming to come to the same conclusion he did.

Toothless came out from between two rocks with a jubilant bark of a growl. He bounded to Hiccup and nosed him gratefully, knocking him to the ground and licking him with enthusiasm. Hiccup protested but by the time he pushed the happy dragon off he was covered in warm dragon saliva.

"We're happy to see you too, bud." Hiccup said as he wiped the spit from his face. Toothless nuzzled him again before he sauntered to Astrid and nosed her gently.

"Let's go back and get the saddlebags and get the hell out of here." Astrid sighed.

"I've got no objections." Hiccup stood up. "Want to give us a ride, Toothless? My legs are still tired."

Hiccup climbed up on Toothless's back and held a hand out to Astrid. She gripped his hand and sat behind him. She snaked her arms around his waist and hugged him tight. Toothless flew from the clearing to their little cave and campsite in a matter of a few short minutes.

Being in the air again felt amazing. Hiccup regretting landing again but he knew they'd be off in a short while. The supplies in the saddlebags had been depleted over the past few days. They were considerably lighter now than when the first left Berk. But if they fished for food they'd be alright. They attached them to the saddle and we off again in no time.

Hiccup waited until Astrid's arms were snug around his middle to give Toothless the okay to fly high and fast. They soared up and soon the island shaped like an axe was a pebble in the great ocean. Clouds puffed in the distance.

"Astrid," Hiccup asked after a little while.

"Hmm?" Astrid murmured. She was resting her head against his shoulder.

"I want to ask you something." Hiccup said.

"Go ahead." Astrid said.

"Do youâ€¦do you resent me for bringing you back?" Hiccup asked. He held his breath for her answer. But he wasn't prepared for her laughter. "What?"

"No." Astrid said as her laughter faded. She hugged him and sighed into his shoulder. "I'm sorry I picked that fight with you. I didn't mean anything I said. I just wanted to make Richard think I did. Are you thinking about what happened to Richard?"

"Yeah, a little." Hiccup confirmed.

"Don't worry, Hiccup." Astrid said. "I'll never leave you on purpose. No matter what stupid decisions you make. Thick or thin, I'll be beside you."

Hiccup reached down and laced his fingers with hers. She felt so warm and alive. Her body heat radiated into his back. Even though his face was chilled with cold there was a fire inside his chest keeping him warm.

"Thank you, Astrid." Hiccup said. So what is she was dead a month ago? So what if she belong on the other side? Where does anyone belong? Anywhere they are is where they belong. Right now, Astrid belong with them. With him.

"You doing alright?" Astrid asked. She rested her chin on his shoulder.

"Yeah, I'm doing great." Hiccup said. He laughed. It wasn't out of humor but out of joy. It was a feeling of freedom he hadn't felt in a year. Everything was going the right way. Everything wasâ€¦perfect.

The day went too fast as all good days so. The sun dipped down and settle in the puffy clouds in the west, lighting them with amber gold. Toothless landed, reluctantly, on a small green island. Astrid felt a chill down her front when Hiccup dismounted.

While Hiccup and Toothless gathered up enough fish for three Astrid built a fire. It blazed up and Astrid was about to call out to the Hiccup when she saw something between two trees. It was a pale face and dark eyes surrounded a mass of black hair. Astrid glanced back over to where Hiccup and Toothless were playing in the water. They wouldn't notice.

Astrid meandered over to where the ghost woman stood. She smiled sweetly. She looked lighter than she had.

"They are both adorable." she sighed.

"I know." Astrid smiled. "Did he panic when he saw you?"

"A little, but he recovered when I mentioned you." she smiled. "You were more important to him than to be afraid of something as frivolous as a ghost.

"What about you?" Astrid asked. "How do you feel now that Richard is where he should be?"

"Glad, but also a little sad." she said.

"Sad?" Astrid asked.

"Remember that he was once a man I loved." the ghost woman said mournfully. "But that man has long been gone. I am glad that justice was won this time. I feel at peace. I can feel the in-between fading. It won't be long now until I enter the beyond."

"I'm glad." Astrid smiled.

"You should think about using your gifts to help spirits stuck in the in-between." the ghost woman said. "Helping them enter the beyond, learning what keeps them trapped."

Helping trapped spirits? It sounded noble and terrifying at the same time.

There was a splash. Astrid spun to face the beach. Toothless had leaped into the water and covered Hiccup with a wave of water. He was standing with dripping arms out wide, groaning but laughing. Astrid laughed at the sight. She turned back to the woman but she was fading from sight.

"Oh, look at that." the ghost woman said. She looked down at herself and smiled. He wrapped her arms around herself and sighed. "My time waiting is over. Thank you, Astrid."

"I should be thanking you." Astrid said as the woman grew lighter and lighter. "But, you're welcome."

The ghost woman smiled and waved as she vanished completely.

"Astrid, what're you doing?" Hiccup asked as he came dripping wet onto the beach. He had several fish ready on sticks to be cooked. Toothless was having his fill on the beach.

"Nothing." Astrid shrugged. "Just watching you two dorks."

"Hey," Hiccup tried to act insulted but he was smiling. He set the fish over the fire and set down beside it to dry out his clothes.

"So what do you think Esol and Chuck are doing right now?" Astrid asked. She arranged the fish over the fire and sat down beside him. She kept a distance so she wouldn't get wet. She preferred to stay dry.

"It's hard to say. I'd like to think they made it to wherever they were going and are settling down." Hiccup shrugged. "Maybe then Stormfly is on her way back to Berk as we speak."

"Maybe." Astrid adjusted her feet. "It would be nice to see her again."

"You will." Hiccup said. "You know, speaking of Esol and Chuckâ€¦"

"Yeah? What?" Astrid asked. Hiccup was actingâ€¦weird. He was fidgety and nervous. He kept looking into the fire and avoided her gaze.

"Oh, you know, I was just thinkingâ€¦about themâ€¦and them settling in a totally new home." Hiccup twisted his hands together. Astrid waited, knowing that interrupting him will only delay whatever he was trying to say further. "Do youâ€¦thinkâ€¦that they'llâ€¦"
>"â€¦That they'llâ€¦? What?" Astrid asked after he'd paused for a considerable moment. "Use your words, Hiccup."<p>

Hiccup laughed nervously. He rubbed his face and inhaled and exhaled slowly. "Do you think they'll get married?"

"I don't know. Maybe. It's a definite possibility." Astrid shrugged. What was so nerve-wracking about that question?

"I think they'll be a good couple." Hiccup said. He was tapping his foot.

"Hiccup, are you okay?" Astrid asked. "You're acting a littleâ€¦off."

"It'sâ€¦nothingâ€¦but, I meanâ€¦I was thinkingâ€¦aboutâ€¦aboutâ€¦you, and meâ€¦usâ€¦andâ€¦well, it's justâ€¦I was thinkingâ€¦" Hiccup swallowed several times.

"Hiccup." Astrid said sternly. "Just say it."

He jumped. "I-Iâ€¦"

"Hiccup!"

"Iwannagetmarried." Hiccup blurted out.

Had she heard what she thought she heard? "What?"

Hiccup swallowed. He closed his eyes for a moment and turned to face her. He reached out for her hands. "Astrid, will you marry me?"

That's what she thought she heard. An overwhelming warmth surged through her stomach and chest filling her like a balloon. She couldn't speak or breathe. Hiccup was looking at her with wide waiting eyes and his hands were shaking. He bit his lower lip. He looked as though there was doubt.

Astrid laughed, and felt a surge of wetness behind her eyes. She still couldn't speak but instead she threw herself around his neck. He was soaked but she didn't care. He hesitated but wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in close.

"Soâ€¦" Hiccup asked.

"How could I say no?" Astrid said, swallowing the happy tears. Tears were still tears.

Hiccup laughed in relief. "I thought I messed it up or something."

Astrid laughed. She pulled herself from him just enough to look at him. The aftermath of his nerves were still lingering. She put a hand on his cheek. He really had no idea how much of an adorable dork he was. She leaned in for a kiss, and then another.

"I love you," Astrid rubbed her thumb along his cheekbone.

"You know I love you, Astrid." Hiccup smiled.

The fish were burning but neither of them cared. Toothless sauntered up with a stomach full of fish and plopped down beside the fire. A sigh said he was ready for a night's rest.

And try as they might sleep was unavoidable. The blanket was calling. What was another night spent in each other's arms? When compared to the rest of their lives it was just a night but it was a wonderful night spent under the bright stars.

-The End-

Thank you to everyone who read and enjoyed this story. It was load of fun writing it and reading your reviews! Thanks again!

20. Epilogue

Okay, here's the epilogue to Cheating Death and a short blurb for the sequel. I warn you in advance that the sequel is still a flat outline with few details. I'll spend some time working those out before I start posting. But enough talk â€" Onward!

Epilogue

The skies over Berk were a madhouse of clouds. Wispy ones were racing like wild dragons while colossal puffs where staggering upwards into

the heavens. A breeze rattled doors and hanging laundry.

"Oh, just listen at that." Ingrid sighed as she tied the shutters closed. They had been rattling all morning. Finally she couldn't take anymore and tied them closed. "All this flipping and flopping will keep me up tonight."

Astrid sat at the table and watched the fire flutter. The wind pushing through cracks and crannies and fought against the bright flames. The humidity was heavy on the air. No doubt there'd be a storm that evening and into the night.

"You'd best hurry, Astrid." Ingrid said as she returned to the table. "You don't want to be late."

"Oh, Hiccup is always late. I've got time." Astrid reassured her.

Astrid had helped Ingrid with the morning meal. She'd been telling her that she needed to learn how to cook if she was going to be a wife someday. Astrid had laughed to herself. She and Hiccup had kept their engagement a secret. They knew that if anyone found out it would be a short few hours until the entire village knew. And if Stoick heard the news they'd be married as soon as possible.

Until Hiccup and Astrid got used to the idea of marriage no one else had to know. They'd announce the news when they were ready.

When Hiccup and Astrid had returned to Berk from their excursion Ingrid had reluctantly welcomed Astrid back into her home. She was tense and nervous about it but over the next several days she had eased. It was almost like everything was returning to normal. Although, Astrid knew it would never be exactly the same.

Astrid lingered a bit longer with her aunt Ingrid, trying to nurse the severed relationship. Ingrid was trying and Astrid respected her for that. She knew something had happened to make her change her mind but she didn't want to ask what.

"I'd better be going. He'll never let me hear the end of it if I'm the one who's late." Astrid smiled as she stood to leave.

"What out for that wind. Don't want you blowing away." Ingrid waved politely.

Astrid waved goodbye and pulled open the door. A strong breeze pushed it inward and Astrid had to work hard to close it. Outside Vikings were securing their houses and possessions in anticipation for a storm. The massive and threatening clouds way out over the ocean were tell-tale signs.

Astrid started toward Hiccup's house. They'd made plans to meet after breakfast at the cove. However, since Astrid would be on foot Hiccup suggested they ride there together. Stoick was securing the back door with planks when Astrid walked up.

"Morning, Astrid." He said, hammer in hand.

"Morning, Chief." Astrid responded politely. She felt a twinge of guilt for not telling Stoick about the engagement, not because he was

chief but he was Hiccup's father. She'd thought about saying something several times but she didn't know how to bring it up without sounding weird. And Hiccup wanted to tell him together, whenever that was.

Hiccup came flying in from the dock's direction. He didn't even stop to dismount.

"Ready?" He asked. He seemed like he was in a hurry.

"Yeah." Astrid nodded.

"What's the rush, Hiccup?" Stoick asked. He was done with the backdoor was had a ladder at the ready. It looked like Hiccup's second floor window was next.

"Johan just arrived and he had a letter from Esol." Hiccup said.

There was a slight nerve twitch in Stoick's face. Hiccup had told her that Stoick was still sore about his son's involvement in Esol's disappearance. But that twitch soon was recoiled.

"Johan's early?" Stoick asked. Johan wasn't expected for two more days.

"Yeah, I guess the wind worked with him." Hiccup shrugged. He gave Hiccup the motion for flight and soon they were soaring back into the air. Astrid hugged on with a tension that she hadn't been able to get rid of. Without a securing belt like Hiccup's she was at the mercy of her grip on his waist.

They made it to the cove in no time at all. Toothless landed and they dismounted. The wind seemed to go right over the cove and it was left still. The sound it made was chilling, though. Wind rushed over the rocks and through the towering trees with a high-pitched whistling like a million children.

"I came here earlier to get it ready." Hiccup had said.

Astrid hadn't been paying attention until then. She looked where Hiccup was standing, arms out proud, to see a picnic set up on an old stump. He'd spread a blanket over the wood and made two place settings. An unlit candle was in the middle.

"You came here just for this?" Astrid smiled. He could be so sweet sometimes.

Hiccup nodded. He had that nervousness about him again. He needed approval, reassurance, a proud thanking.

"Hiccup, it's great." Astrid smiled. She saw the instant sigh in Hiccup's tense muscles. There was a reason why Hiccup didn't do things like this very often. It wasn't because he didn't care or wasn't romantic. If he did he'd stress himself to death.

Astrid walked to him and pecked him on the cheek.

"Of course, since we just had breakfast we've got plenty of time before lunch." Hiccup shrugged.

Astrid laughed. Anyone else would have said that as a sexual innuendo. But not Hiccup. He was looking to the sky. At the sound of her laughter he looked back down with his innocent confusion.

"Oh, come on, Astrid!" Hiccup exclaimed humorously as it dawned on him.

"You said it, not me." Astrid laughed.

"You thought it, not me." Hiccup said, kissing her cheek. "But seriously, a flight before lunch?"

"What about Esol's letter?" Astrid asked.

Hiccup almost jumped. "I already forgot!"

He scrambled to find the letter he'd stashed in the satchel. Several papers fell out and he searched. Astrid knelt down to pick them up. They looked like drawings of some sort, designs. Interested, Astrid took a closer look while Hiccup was busy with the letter searching.

They were designs.

"Hiccup, what are these?" Astrid asked.

Hiccup turned around and the instant he saw what was in her hands he tried to snatch them away. But Astrid moved out of his range just in time.

"Is this a flight suit?" Astrid read the name he'd scribbled across the top of each paper. Each was a specific limb of a leather-bound suit with hidden nooks and compartments. It looked ridiculous.

"It's nothing I was just being creative, you know." Hiccup shrugged. He pulled his arms back to his sides and fidgeted with the letter he'd found.

Astrid wanted to laugh but she didn't. She got to the last page and saw something that flipped in her chest.

"Are these wings?" Astrid asked.

"Yes." Hiccup said quietly, like a child in trouble.

"Are you planning to fly?" Astrid asked. Was he mad? He'd kill himself.

"It's a prototype." Hiccup shrugged. He was having trouble making eye contact.

"Hiccup, that's a horrible idea." Astrid told him. She handed his designs back to him. "What if you fall? Or run into something? You're not a dragon, Hiccup. What if something malfunctions and you fall? Who'll be riding Toothless while you're flying? What if you fall?"

"I won't fall, Astrid." Hiccup put his hands out like he did when

calming a dragon. Palms flat on the air, he gently moved them downward. "I promise. I won't test it out until I'm sure it's stable. And I'm working on a new tail system that will help Toothless stay in flight without me on the saddle. And I'm trying to figure out a way that his tail will work with any foot, instead of just mine."

He motioned to his metal leg.

Astrid sighed. There was no talking him out of it. "Right, well, you found the letter?"

"Yes." Hiccup said. He was glad to change the subject.

He unfolded the paper and Astrid came in closer to look over his shoulder.

Hiccup,

It's Esol! Chuck and I have finally found the island we were looking for. Apparently, someone isn't as good with directions as he thought. We stopped a few times to make sure this place even existed!

The locals were hesitant at first but I think they're just a shy people. We've got a little house near the beach and Chuck had a job fishing. I've made friends with the local women and after explaining our story to them I think they're warming up to us. One woman said she could get me a job at the temple!

Everything seems to be working out very well. On the island they've had a small problem with some Changewings and when we first arrived Chuck used all that you told him about dragons to help them out. I think those dragons are starting to like him!

Maybe one day you and Astrid could visit us here. The island is beautiful! They say it's the volcanic soil that keeps it all so lush and plentiful. The air is clear and the fish are plenty.

As promised, once we were settled I told Stormfly to head home. She left day before yesterday but I don't know how many days it is from here to Berk by dragon. Could be any day! I'll send this letter with Johan as soon as he arrived. It's hard to believe he's known here too! That man has been everywhere!

I'll write again soon. Thank you again for everything that you've done for me, Hiccup. Maybe one day I'll find a way to repay the favor.

Esol and Chuck

"That's a lot of exclamation points." Astrid commented on Hiccup's shoulder.

"I'm glad they're alright. I was worried they'd wander forever." Hiccup half-laughed.

"And, you trained a new dragon trainer." Astrid mused.

Hiccup smiled. "It's nice to think that I'm spreading dragon training. It'll end a lot of conflicts between dragons and people."

"Hiccup Horrendous Haddock, changing the world one dragon at a time." Astrid said in a mock-speech tone.

Hiccup laughed but he couldn't hide the blush across his cheeks.

Toothless, who had been playing with a courageous fish in the shallows, suddenly stood straight. His eyes weren't looking but his ears were listening intently.

"Bud, what is it?" Hiccup said with caution.

Toothless stepped out of the water and was on one edge. He was looking upward and his ears were twitching every way. He called out to the sky and listened, and repeated. After a few calls his tension eased.

"What's happening?" Astrid asked Hiccup.

He shook his head, but soon they heard a return call. It was distant and definitely a dragon. Toothless called back into the sky. The other dragon called back, this time closer.

"I think he's calling to it." Hiccup said. "He knows the other dragon."

They called out back and forth. Each time the other dragon grew closer. Over the wind it was hard to identify. Toothless almost seemed excited.

"Wait, Hiccup, doesn't that sound familiar?" Astrid asked. The call was closing in but still hindered by the strong winds.

"A little, yeah." Hiccup agreed. He was listening to the wind and Toothless was standing up on his back legs. It's like he wanted to get as close as he could.

The call sounded again and this time was just over the trees.

"That's-" Hiccup started to say but Astrid cut him off.

"Stormfly!" Astrid jumped with joy.

The deadly nadder came over the trees just as Astrid spoke. The blue and yellow scaled creature was unmistakable. Toothless called upward as Stormfly prepared for a hasty landing in the cove. She was struggling against the wind but once she cleared the cove's opening she glided to the ground.

Astrid was overjoyed and ran to meet her. Stormfly chirped as she nuzzled Astrid, nearly knocking her over. Astrid wrapped an arm around the horn on Stormfly's nose and tucked the other under her chin. As Stormfly chirped she lifted Astrid off the ground.

"You can't get timelier than that." Hiccup laughed. He patted the dragon's nose and she eagerly drank the attention.

"Let's write back to Esol." Astrid said. "Before Johan gets blown

back out to sea."

Hiccup laughed but didn't waste time. He withdrew parchment and a little ink bottle. He gently shook it and sighed.

"Almost out?" Astrid asked.

"Yeah. I think I have enough for a letter but I hope Johan has more." Hiccup said as he uncorked it.

"Tell her that Stormfly made it home." Astrid said as she gave the dragon a warm pat with her hand.

"Uh-huh." Hiccup said as he started to write.

"And tell her how great it is that Chuck is training the changewings."

"Uh-huh."

"Oh, and tell her that we found Richard and defeated him."

"Uh-huh."

"And mention-"

"Do you want to write it?" Hiccup interrupted. He was sitting at the stump with the ink-dipped quill in his open hand.

"No, I'm sorry. You're doing great." Astrid smiled. She stood behind him to read over his shoulder as he wrote.

Esol and Chuck,

It's great that you made it there safe. Stormfly just made it back. Johan arrived today with your letter and we'd just read it. Weird how things happen sometimes. I'm glad that Chuck was able to use what I told him to help the people and dragons. Maybe one day the people on the island can coexist with them like we do here on Berk.

Astrid and I found the man that was eluding death and tricked him back into the underworld. The story is a lot longer than I've got room to write and ink to write with. I'll write it down when I have more ink.

We're both back on Berk and everything slowly returning to normal. Or as normal as it can be. Astrid is learning to live with her spirit sensitivity.

"Don't call it 'sensativity', Hiccup. It sounds weak." Astrid complained.

"Too late, I already wrote it." Hiccup said.

Astrid groaned but Hiccup continued the letter.

Write back, we're both eager to hear about the new home you're making.

Hiccup and Astrid

"Let's fly it down to Johan." Astrid said as Hiccup blew on the paper to dry the ink completely.

"Right," Hiccup nodded as he folded it. Astrid climbed up on an eager Stormfly and waited for Hiccup and Toothless.

Stormfly chirped and treaded on the ground. Although she's just flown Thor know how many miles home she was eager to fly with Astrid. She patted the dragon's head. She'd missed her dragon so much.

Something on the edge of the cove caught her eye. She looked instantly but whatever it had been was gone. Astrid glanced at Hiccup who was tucking the letter into the satchel. She looked back to the cove's edge where she thought she'd seen something. She scanned the edge and soon she saw something peeking out from between a cluster of old tree roots. It was a paled face with stringy hair. Two darkened eyes were looking down into the cove.

"Astrid?" Hiccup asked. He was sitting on the saddle and looking to her with curiosity.

"Ready?" Astrid said. He'd seen her looking but she tried to push it off.

"What were you looking at?" Hiccup asked.

Astrid sighed. He knew what she was looking at. "It was nothing."

They both knew that was a lie. She'd been seeing stray spirits here and there. Hiccup had told her she would get this strange look on her face, distant but with an intent. She tried to not notice them but it was impossible. Sometimes, she was sure they were looking at her.

Hiccup sighed this time. "What are you going to do about that?"

"I don't know." Astrid said. "I don't think there's anything I can do. But, I want to try and help the spirits cross to the other side. I'm the only one that can."

"How?" Hiccup asked.

"I don't know. By figuring out what keeps them from it." Astrid shrugged. "I was thinking about the old cave on the mountain. It's out of the way and wouldn't entice the spirits to linger around the village and frightening the random Viking."

"We could spruce it up." Hiccup looked upward even though he couldn't see the cave from there.

Hiccup had had the unfortunately chance encounter with the random spirit. They seemed to follow Astrid, or be attracted to her, and every once in a while Hiccup would claim to see a stray foot or hear footsteps. Most of the time it was shadows and voices, neither of which he was a fan of.

"Ready?" Astrid said.

"Yeah." Hiccup responded with a nudge to Toothless who then leapt into the air.

Astrid followed on Stormfly and once out of the protection of the cove the wind interrupted any conversation they might have had. They flew a little haphazardly toward the docks where Trader Johan's boat. It stood out against the Viking's well used fishing boats.

Hiccup and Astrid had a mini-race over the village. He ultimately won, but only because he knew she hated it when he let her win. Johan was still on his ship and trying to talk Fishlegs into some new volume of knowledge he'd procured in some unknown little civilization.

"The tale behind the tome is more invigorating than the book itself!" Johan was saying to Fishlegs.

At the sight of Hiccup and Astrid, Johan thrust the book into Fishlegs's hands and bowed with a relish of his hands.

"Master Hiccup, pleasure to see you again this day." Johan said.

"We've got a letter for delivery." Hiccup said, handing the folded paper to Johan.

"Ah, to the Miss Esol, I presume? She told me not to leave Berk without a reply." Johan smiled. He tucked the letter into a satchel that was inside a chest. It was where he kept his paper items and special deliveries.

"And do you have any more ink?" Hiccup asked as Johan closed the chest.

"As a matter of factâ€¦!" Johan put up a finger to indicate the beginning of a magnificent story.

Hiccup sighed but Johan went on with his tale. Astrid nudged Hiccup with a grin. He'd honestly walked right into it. Fishlegs traded another book for the new one and scooted out of there as fast as he could. It seemed the ink was at the bottom of a very deep barrel of items for Johan kept pulling out intriguing item after another all while telling his story with feverish detail.

-End-

That epilogue turned out longer than I thought it would. Oh, well. But, now's the time for that sequel summary I kept telling you about! Yay!

I don't have a title yet, at least nothing clever, so right now it's still "Cheating Death 2" because it helps keep files organized on my computer.

And, as promised, here's your summary:

A year has passed since Hiccup and Astrid faced the man that eluded Death. Life on Berk has returned to normal. Hiccup spends his days in the air and at the smithy working on "new and improved" building

designs for Berk. Astrid is working with the spirits at her mountain retreat and helping them to pass on to the beyond. However, something terrible has happened and the spirit world is sent into a tizzy. Astrid reaches out to the spirits and one reaches back, a young girl with a tragic fate. Within her vision Astrid sees the island where Esol and Chuck have made their home. They are in trouble, not only Esol and Chuck but everyone on the island.

It's a working summary, like I said before. I tried not to give away too much while still revealing enough of the plot to make it interesting. Haha, I thought about doing a one-liner summary just to be a butt. So yeah, the second one would be less people and death oriented and more spirit and spirit world. I've got it in my head but I don't want to just tell you the entire plot.

If you really want to know you'll just have to wait and see!

End
file.